

The Hoyden





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THE HOYDEN

A NOVEL

BY

MRS. HUNGERFORD

AUTHOR OF

'MOLLY BAWN,' 'THE O'CONNORS OF BALLINAHINCH,'
'NOR WIFE NOR MAID,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.



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THE HOYDEN

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HOW 'THAT GIRL' WAS 'SEEN' BY THE DOWAGER LADY RYLTON ; AND HOW TITA HELD HER SMALL HEAD VERY HIGH, AND FOUGHT A GOOD FIGHT WITH THE ENEMY.

THERE is scarcely time for Lady Rylton to make arrangements for a private interview with her daughter-in-law, as Mrs. Bethune has scarcely left her room before that small person knocks at the door. And there is, perhaps, a slight touch of confusion on the older woman's face as Tita enters. She had not had time to prepare the little bitter barbs she had meant to fling against the

girl's heart, and is now slightly taken aback.

However, Nature, the All-Mother, has been generous to Tessie in the way of venom, and after a moment or two she tells herself that she will be able to get through this interview with honour.

'My dear Tita. You! So glad! Pray come and sit down.'

'I just came,' says Tita smiling, but hesitating on the threshold, as if desirous of an excuse to run away again as quickly as possible, 'to see if you were quite comfortable—quite happy.'

'Ah, *happy!*' says Lady Rylton in a peculiar tone. 'Do come in, Tita. It is a fad of mine—a silly one, no doubt—but I cannot bear to look at an open door. Besides, I wish to speak to you.'

Tita closes the door and comes well into the room. She does not seat herself, however; she remains standing near the chimney-piece.

'About what?' asks she promptly.

'About many things.' Perhaps the girl's bluntness has daunted her a little, because, as she says this, she moves uneasily, and finally changes her seat for a low lounge that brings the light on the back of her head. 'I am sorry to say I have heard several very unpleasant things about you of late.'

Tita stares at her.

'I don't understand you,' says she.

'Then it must be my unhappy task to have to explain myself,' says Tessie, who has now recovered herself, and is beginning to revel in the situation. The merriest game of all, to *some* people, is that of hurting the feelings of others. 'For one thing, I am grieved to hear that you have made my son far from happy in his married life.'

A quick red dyes Tita's face. It lasts for a moment only. She controls herself admirably, and, going to a chair, pulls it a little forward in a perfectly self-possessed fashion, pausing a little over the exact

position of it, after which she seats herself amongst the cushions.

‘Has Maurice told you that?’ asks she.

‘Maurice? *No!*’ haughtily. ‘In *our* set husbands do not complain of their wives.’

‘No?’ says Tita. She looks amused. ‘Then who else could it be in “our set” who has said nasty little things about me? Mrs. Bethune?’

‘All this is beside the question,’ says the dowager, with a wave of her hand. ‘There is something else I must speak of—painful though it is to me!’ She unfurls the everlasting fan, and wafts it delicately to and fro, as if to blow away from her the hideous aroma of the thing she is forced to say. ‘I hear you have established a—er—a far too friendly relationship with a—er—a cousin of your own.’

If Tita had grown red before, she is very white now.

‘I am sure you are not aware of it,’ says she, setting her small teeth, but speaking

quite calmly, ‘but you are very impertinent.’

‘I—I?’ says Lady Rylton. In all her long, tyrannical life she has met with so few people to show her defiance, that now this girl’s contemptuous reply daunts her. ‘You forget yourself,’ says she, with ill-suppressed fury.

‘No, indeed,’ says Tita, ‘it is because I remember myself that I spoke like that. And I think it will save time,’ says she quietly, ‘and perhaps a good deal of temper too—mine,’ smiling coldly, ‘is not good, you know—if you understand at once that I shall not allow you to say insolent things like that to me.’

‘*You allow me!*’ Tessie gets up from her chair and stares at her opponent, who remains seated, looking back at her. ‘I see you have made up your mind to ruin my son,’ says she, changing her tone to one of tearful indignation. ‘You accepted him, you married him, but you have never made even an effort to love him.’

Here Tessie sinks back in her chair and covers her eyes with her handkerchief. This is her way of telling people she is crying ; it saves the rouge and the powder, and leaves the eyelashes as black as before.

‘It is not always easy to love someone who is in love with someone else,’ says Tita.

‘Someone else ! What do you mean ?’

‘There is one fault, at all events, that you cannot find with me,’ says Tita ; ‘I have not got a bad memory. As if it were only yesterday, I remember how you enlightened me about Maurice’s affection —she would have said ‘love,’ but somehow she cannot—‘for—for Mrs. Bethune.’

‘Pouf !’ says the dowager. ‘*That !* I don’t see how that can influence your conduct. You married my son, and you ought to do your duty by him. As for Marian, if you had been a good wife you should have taught him to forget all that long ago. It seems you have not.’ She

darts this barbed arrow with much joy, and watches for the pain it ought to have caused, but watches in vain. ‘The fact of your remembering it all this time only shows,’ says Tessie vindictively, angry at the failure of her dart, ‘what a malicious spirit you have. You are not only malicious, but silly! People of the world *never* remember unpleasant things.’

‘Well, I am not of them; *I* remember,’ says Tita. She pauses. ‘People of the world seem to me to do strange things.’

‘On the contrary,’ with a sneer, ‘it is people who are not in society who do strange things.’

‘Meaning me?’ flushing and frowning. Tita’s temper is beginning to give way. ‘What have I done now?’ asks she.

‘That is what I have been trying to explain,’ says Lady Rylton, ‘but your temper is so frightful that I am afraid to go into anything. Temper, my dear Tita, should always be one’s slave; it should never be given liberty except in one’s

room, with one's own maid or one's own husband.'

'Or one's own mother-in-law!'

'Well, yes! Quite so!' says Tessie with a fine shrug. 'If you *will* make me one apart, so be it. I hate scenes; but when one has a son—a precious, *only* child—one must make sacrifices.'

'I beg you will make none for *me*.'

'I have made one already, however. I have permitted my son to marry you.'

'Lady Rylton—'

'Be silent!' says Tessie, in a low but terrible voice. 'How *dare* you interrupt me, or speak to me at all, until I ask for a reply? *You*, whom I have brought from the very depths, to a decent position in society! You—whom I have raised!'

'Raised!'

'Yes—you! I tell you you owe me a debt you never can repay.'

'I do indeed,' says Tita, in a low voice; her small firm hands are clasped in front of her—they are tightly clenched.

'You married him for ambition,' goes on Tessie, with cold hatred in her voice and eye, 'and—'

'And he?' The girl has risen now, and is clinging with both hands to the arms of her chair. She is very pale.

'Pshaw!' says the dowager, laughing cruelly. 'He married you for your money. What else do you think he would marry *you* for? Are you to learn that now?'

'No.' Tita throws up her head. '*That* pleasure is denied you. He told me he was marrying me for my money, long before our marriage.'

Lady Rylton laughs.

'What! He had the audacity?'

'The honesty!' Somehow this answer, coming straight from Tita's heart, goes to her soul, and in some queer, indescribable way soothes her—comforts her—gives her deep compensation for all the agony she has been enduring. Later on she wonders why the agony *was* so great! Why had she cared or suffered? Maurice and she?

What are they to each other? A mere name—no more! And yet—and yet!

'At all events,' goes on Tessie, 'when you made up your mind to marry my son, you—'

'It was your son who married me,' says Tita, with a touch of hauteur that sits very prettily on her. She feels suddenly stronger—more equal to the fight.

'Was it? I quite forgot'—Tessie shrugs her shoulders—'these *little* points,' says she. 'Well, I give you that! Oh! he was honest!' says she. 'But, after all, not quite honest enough.'

'I think he was honest,' says Tita.

Her heart is beginning to beat to suffocation. There is a horror in her mind—the horror of hearing again that he—he had loved Marian. But how to stop it?

'You seem to admire honesty,' says Lady Rylton, with a sneering laugh. 'It is a pity you do not emulate *his*! If Maurice is as true to you as you'—with a slight laugh—'imagine him, why, you

should, in common generosity, be true to him. And this flirtation, with this Mr. Hescott——'

'Don't go on!' says Tita passionately; 'I cannot bear it. Whoever has told you that I ever—— Oh!' She covers her eyes suddenly with her pretty hands. 'Oh! it is a lie!' cries she.

'No one has told me a lie,' says Lady Rylton implacably.

The sight of the girl's distress is very pleasant to her. She gloats over it.

'Then you have invented the whole thing,' cries Tita wildly, who is so angry, so agitated, that she forgets the commonest decencies of life. We all do occasionally!

'To be rude is not to be forcible,' says Tessie, who is now a fury, 'and I believe all that I have heard about you! She makes a quick movement towards Tita, her colour showing even through the washes that try to make her skin look young. 'How *dare* you insult me?' cries

she furiously. Tessie in a rage is almost the vulgarest thing that anyone could see.
‘I wish my son had never seen you—or your money. I wish now he had married the woman he loved, instead of the woman whom—’

‘He hated,’ puts in Tita very softly.

She smiles in a sort of last defiance, but every hope she has seems lying dead. In a second, as it were, she seems to *care* for nothing. What *is* there to care for? It is so odd. But it is true! How blank the whole thing is!

‘Yes. *Hated!*’ says Tessie in a cold fury. ‘I tell you he wanted to marry Marian, and her only. He would have given his soul for her, but she would not marry him! And then, when hope was at an end, he—destroyed self—he married *you*!’

‘You are very plain! You leave nothing to be said.’ Tita has compelled herself to this answer, but her voice is faint. Her poor little face, beautiful even in its dis-

tress, is as white as death. 'I am sorry——'

'For Maurice? So you *ought* to be,' says Lady Rylton, unmoved even by that pathetic face before her.

Tita turns upon her. All at once the old spirit springs to life within the poor child's breast.

'No, *for myself!*' cries she, with a bitterness hardly to be described.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HOW TITA GOES FOR A WALK WITH TWO SAD
COMPANIONS—ANGER AND DESPAIR ; AND
HOW SHE MEETS SIR MAURICE ; AND HOW
SHE INTRODUCES HIM TO ANGER.

ESCAPING from her mother-in-law's room, Tita goes hurriedly, carefully downstairs. There is no one in the smaller hall ; she runs through it, and into one of the conservatories that has a door leading to the gardens outside. It is a small conservatory, little frequented ; and when one gets to the end of the two steps, one finds one's self at the part of the garden that leads directly into the woods beyond.

Tita, flinging open the little rustic gate

that opens a way to these woods, hastens through it as though all the furies are at her back, and never ceases running until she finds herself a good half-mile from home.

And now she throws herself upon a soft mossy bank, and, clasping her hands in front of her, gives herself up to thought. Most women when in grief make direct for their bedrooms; Tita, a mere child of Nature, has turned to her mother in her great extremity. Her heart seems on fire, her eyes dry and burning. Her quick, angry run has left her tired and panting, and like one at bay.

She lays her flushed cheek against the cold, sweet mosses.

How good, how *eternally* good is the exquisite heart of the earth! A very balm from it seems now to arise and take this young creature into its embrace. The coolness, the softness of it! Who shall describe it? The girl lying on the ground, not understanding, feels the great light

hand of the All-Mother on her head, and suddenly the first great pang dies. Nature, the supreme Hypnotizer, has come to her rescue, not dulling or destroying the senses, but soothing them, and showing a way out of the darkness, flinging a lamp into the dim, winding ways of her misery.

The cool mosses have brought her to herself again. She sits up, and, taking her knees into her embrace, looks out upon the world. To her it seems a cruel world, full of nothing but injustice. She has a long talk with herself, poor child!—a most bitter conversation. And the end of it is this : If only she could *see* Maurice and tell him—*tell* him what she thinks of him ! and if only — But it seems so impossible.

And here is where Mother Nature's doings come in. She has driven Maurice from his house almost as Tita left it, and has sent him here ; for does he not know that Tita loves this solitary spot, and——

He has sprung upon the wall, and it is

quite suddenly he sees her. Her attitude makes his heart stand still. Has it come to this? Has he brought her to this? What a child she was when he married her!—light-hearted, free——

Free! Was she free? This word spoils all his sympathy. Was she really free? Did she not love her cousin even then, when she consented to marry *him*? He springs lightly to the ground; his gun is on his shoulder, but he lays that against a tree, and goes lightly towards her.

How still she is! How tightly her small hands are clasped! How *very* small they are! Is that the first ring he had given her, shining on her third finger? She had not flung *that* back in his face, at all events! He hardly understands the wild, quick thrill of joy that this knowledge affords him. And how pale she is!

‘In all her face was not one drop of blood.’

She is staring before her, as if into the future—as if *demanding* happiness from it for her youth. He goes quickly to her.

'I was just getting over that fence there,' says he, in a rather stammering sort of way, the new strange pallor on that small, erstwhile happy face having disarranged his nerves a little, 'when I saw you. I am glad I saw you, as I wanted to say that perhaps I spoke to you too—roughly last night.'

Tita remains silent. Something in her whole air seems to him changed. Her eyes—her mouth—what has happened to them? Such a change! And all since last night! Had he indeed been so rough with her as to cause all this?

'How bitter and winterly waxed last night
 The air that was mild!
How nipped with frost were the flowers last night
 That at dawning smiled!
How the bird lost the tune of the song last night
 That the spring beguiled!'

Did it all happen last night? He breaks through his wonder to hear her.

'I don't know how you dared speak to me at all,' says she at last slowly, deliberately.

Where is the childish anger now that used to irritate—and amuse him? It is all gone. This is hardly Tita, this girl, cold, repellent; it is an absurd thought, but it seems to him that she has grown!

'I spoke—because—— I think I explained,' says he, somewhat incoherently, upset not so much by her words (which are strange, too) as by the strange look that accompanies them.

'Ah, explained!' says she. Her lips curl slightly, and her eyes (always fastened upon his) seem to grow darker. 'If you are coming to explanations——' says she softly, but with some intensity. 'Have you explained things? And when? Was it *before* our marriage? It *should* have been, I think!'

Rylton changes colour. It is such a sudden change that the girl goes over to him and lays her hand upon his chest

'Did you think—all this time—that I did not know?' says she, raising her eyes to his—such solemn young eyes. 'I have

known it a long, long time. *Always*, I think! Your mother told me when we went to the Hall after our—trip abroad.'

'She told you what?'

It is a last effort to spare—— To spare whom? Marian or himself—or—— All at once he knows it is Tita whom he would spare.

'Ah, that is useless,' says Tita, with a slight gesture. 'She told me a great deal then; she has told me more to-day.'

'To-day?'

'A few last items,' says the girl, her eyes burning into his as she stands before him, her hand upon his breast. 'Shall I tell them to you? You married me for my money! You ruined your life'—she seems to be looking back and repeating things that had been said to her—'by doing *that*. Your mother,' slowly, 'seemed sorry that your life was ruined!'

'Tita!'

'No, listen; there is a little more. You only consented to make me your wife when

you found Mrs. Bethune would not have you.'

'You shall hear me,' says he.

His face is as white as death now, but she silences him. She lifts her small, cold hand from his breast, and lays it on his lips that are nearly as cold.

'You proposed to her four times! All your love was hers! And it was only when hope was *dead*—when life seemed worthless—that you—married me.'

'She told you that—all that?' asks Rylton; he has caught her hand.

'All that—and more.' Tita is smiling now, but very pitifully. 'But that was enough. Why take it to heart? It is nothing, really. It does not concern us. Of course, I always knew. You *told* me—that you did not love me.'

'I shall not forgive her,' says Rylton fiercely.

There is anguish as well as rage in his tone. He is holding her hand tightly clenched between both his own.

'I don't care whether you do or not,' says Tita suddenly, almost violently. 'You can forgive her or not, as you choose. The whole thing,' dragging her hand forcibly from his, 'is a matter of no consequence whatever to *me!*'

'You mean that you don't care?' says Rylton, in a suffocating voice.

'Care!' contemptuously. 'No! Why should I care, or wonder, or waste one thought upon your love affairs?'

This insolent answer rouses Rylton from his remorse.

'Why, indeed!' says he, stung by her scorn. 'You have *your own to think of!*'

And now a terrible thing happens—swift as lightning she lifts her hand, and gives him a little stinging blow across his face.

A second afterwards she has her hands upon her breast, and is crying affrightedly.

'I'm sorry—I'm sorry—I'm sorry!'

Yet through all the fright he can hear that there is not an atom of real sorrow in her voice.

'Let that alone,' says he, smiling grimly. 'I dare say I deserved it. I take it meekly, as you see. But now—how is it to be between us?'

'You know. You *ought* to know. We agreed before our marriage that you were to go your way, and I—mine!'

'Very well,' says Rylton slowly. 'Let it be so. Remember always, however,' looking fixedly at her, 'that it was *you* who insisted on it.'

'I shall remember,' says Tita.

She turns and walks quickly on the path that leads to the house. Rylton turns to accompany her. But she, stopping short, looks up at him with a frowning brow.

'We have been talking about ways,' says she. 'This,' with a little significant gesture to the right, 'is my way.'

He lifts his brows and laughs, a very sad and dismal laugh, however.

'And therefore not mine,' says he. 'You are right so far. I meant to go on

to Upsall Farm, but I should like to see you safely back to the avenue, at all events —if you will allow me ?'

'*No!*' Tita has turned upon him like a little fury. All her rage and grief and misery has at last overpowered her. 'I shall not allow you! I shall go nowhere with you ! Our ways, as you say, are separate.'

'As *I* say——'

'It doesn't matter,' says she vehemently ; 'words are nothing. There is only meaning left, and what *I* mean is that I want never to go anywhere with you again.'

'As you will, of course,' says he, drawing back. Evidently it is to be war to the knife.

He could have laughed at himself as he leans back against a huge oak-tree and lights a cigar. Truly he is no Don Juan ! The woman he loved did not love him to any measurable extent ; the woman he married cares for him even less !

A very rage of anger against Tita is filling his breast, but now, standing here

in the cold soft shades of the silent wood, his anger gives place to thought. By what right is he angry with her? By what right does he upbraid her? She knows all—everything. His *mother* had seen to that. Yes, his wife knows——

And yet, after all, what is there to condemn him for? What man under heaven has been so scrupulous, so careful as he? There had been that one night at the Warbecks' dance—but beyond that, never by word or look had he been unfaithful!

He is beginning almost to pride himself upon his good behaviour, when all at once it comes to him that it has been *easy* to be faithful, that there has been no trouble at all about being scrupulous.

It is like a dagger in his heart. Is it all at an end then? Must it be regarded as a thing that was told—that old, sweet story! Dead, withered, with the life, the meaning, gone from it. And if so, what remains?

Nothing but the face of a small, angry

little girl defying him — defying him always.

Pouf! He thrusts it from him. He lights another cigar. Again the old anger breaks out. Tita's words come back to him. Plainly she would be as glad to get rid of him as he—— She had spoken of her own way. Why not let her go that way? It leads to her cousin. All the finger-posts point in that direction. Well—— If so—— There might be a divorce, and a divorce would mean marriage with Marian, and——

He stands staring stupidly at the ground before him. What is the matter with him? Only three months, three little months ago, and such a thought would have raised ecstasy within his heart, and now——

How flat it all seems, how unprofitable! Nothing seems alive within him save a desire for vengeance on this child who has dared to drag his name into the dust.

This child!

Again her face rises before him. Pale,

determined, scorning him! He had read hatred in her glance, and behind that hatred—bred of it, perhaps—love for her cousin.

He flings his cigar into a bush near him, and goes back to the house, taking the path his wife had chosen.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

HOW TITA, RUNNING FROM THE ENEMY,
SUDDENLY FINDS HERSELF FACE TO FACE
WITH ANOTHER FOE; AND HOW SHE
FIGHTS A SECOND BATTLE, AND COMES
OFF VICTORIOUS!

TITA, once out of the sight of Maurice, had run home very quickly. She knew that she was crying, and despised herself for so doing, but could not check her tears. She was not sure what they meant, grief or rage. Perhaps a little of both. All her guests were in the garden, so she would not return to the house that way, though it was much the nearest; but turning into a side path she made for a point in the

shrubberies, from which one could get to the armoury door without being seen by anyone.

She is wrong in her calculations, however, for just as she steps into the shrubbery walk, she finds herself face to face with Tom Hescott.

'*Tita!* You have been crying!' says he suddenly, after a devouring glance at her small face, that indeed shows all the signs of woe.

'No, no!' cries Tita breathlessly.

She puts up her hands in protestation. She has grown crimson with shame and vexation.

'You have,' says Hescott, almost savagely. The knowledge that he is leaving to-morrow (they are all leaving except the elder Lady Rylton) has rendered him desperate, and made more difficult of concealment the mad passion he entertains for her. 'What has happened?' he asks, going closer to her and letting his cigar drop to the ground. 'Are

you unhappy? You,' breathing quickly, 'have been unhappy for a long time!'

'And even so, am I the only person in the world who is unhappy? Are you never unhappy?' demands Tita defiantly.

'God knows I am, *always!*' says Hescott. 'But you! That *you* should be unhappy!'

'Never mind me,' says Tita petulantly. 'And I must say,' with a little flaming glance at him, 'that it would have been in much better taste if you—if you had pretended to see that I was *not* crying.'

Hescott does not hear, or takes no notice of this little bombshell.

'Has your husband been unkind to you?' asks he sharply, most unpardonably.

Tita looks at him for a second as if he had struck her, and then waves him aside imperiously.

'Maurice is never unkind to me,' says she, 'and even if he were, I should not allow you or anyone to question me in the matter. What are you thinking of?'

‘Of you,’ slowly.

‘You waste your time,’ says Tita.

‘It is not wasted. It is spent on you,’ says Hescott, with compressed but strong passion. ‘And now a last word, Tita. If ever you want to—to——’ He hesitates. ‘To leave him,’ he had almost said, but her proud eyes and her pale lips made him hesitate—*such* pride! It raises his love for her to fever-heat. ‘If ever you should want anyone to help you, I——’

She interrupts him. She makes a haughty little gesture with her hand. It would be impossible to describe the wild grace and beauty of it—or the dignity.

‘If ever I should, I shall have Maurice!’ says she coldly.

Hescott looks at her. Of course he has been told that old story about Mrs. Bethune, and has seen for himself many things.

‘You are an angel!’ says he at last, very sadly; yet he would not have wished her less than that.

'Don't be absurd!' says Tita most ungratefully.

She marches past him with her angry little head still upheld, but presently a word from him brings her to a standstill.

'Don't be angry with me, Tita,' he is saying in a low tone. 'I am going away to-morrow.'

'Ah, so you are!' says Tita. Her sweet nature comes back to her. Dear old Tom! And she has been saying such horrid things to him. 'Never mind me, Tom!' says she, holding out her hand to him. 'I'm dreadfully cross sometimes, but I don't ever mean it, really. And,' smiling gently at him, '*you know* that I love you!'

Hescott takes her hand. His heart seems very full—too full for words. Those words, 'I love you!' He stoops and presses a kiss upon the little warm fingers now resting within his own. And without another word he leaves her.

He is hardly gone, when Rylton lays his hand upon her arm.

'Well,' says he, his voice vibrating with anger. He had followed her, as has been said, with no idea of watching her, but with a curious longing to get near to her again. *Why*, he could hardly have explained even to himself. The only thing he did know in that walk homeward was that he was most horribly, most unreasonably unhappy !

He had followed her and he had found her crying, or at least with the signs of tears upon her eyes, and had seen her cousin kissing her hand. A slight madness came over him then. Crying for her cousin, no doubt, because he must leave her to-morrow !

'Well?' His tone is abrupt, almost brutal. Yet even in this hour where all things point to her discomfiture he cannot get the victory over her.

'Well?' demands she in return, shaking her arm loose from his hold.

'You have been crying for him, no doubt—for your——' He pauses.

'My what?' asks Tita. She is looking at him with fearless, wondering eyes.

'Your cousin,' says Rylton, altering the phrase that would have made it in his anger, 'your lover.'

'I have not been crying because of Tom,' says Tita coldly, 'though I am very sorry he is going. He loves me, I *think*.'

'Do you?' says Rylton. A sarcastic smile crosses his lips. 'And you? Do you love him? No doubt cousins are charming possessions. And so I find you crying because your dear possession is going, and because, no doubt, you were confiding to him what a desperate monster a husband can be.'

There is hardly anything in his life afterwards that Rylton is so ashamed of as this; even now in the heat of the terrible anger that leads him so to forget himself, he cowers before the girl's eyes.

'Is that what people do in *your* set?' says she coldly—icily. 'In the charmed circle within which your mother tells me

I am not fit to enter? If so, I am glad I do not belong to it. Set your mind at ease, Maurice. I have not told Tom anything about you. I have not even told him what a——' She pauses. A flash from her eyes enters his. 'I have told him nothing—nothing,' says she, running past him into the house.

CHAPTER XL.

HOW A LITTLE SPARRING IS DONE AMONGST
THE GUESTS AT OAKDEAN ; AND HOW
TOM HESCOTT TELLS A STORY.

MEANTIME all the others are sitting out in the garden, gossiping to their hearts' content. They had tried tennis, but the courts are rather soft now ; and though an Indian summer has fallen upon us, still it has not sufficed to dry up all the moisture caused by the late rains.

The little thatched hut at the end of the gardens, where the sun is now blazing, has drawn them all into a net, as it were. It is an off day, when there is no shooting, and the women are therefore jubilant, and

distinctly in the ascendant. The elder Lady Rylton is not present, which adds to the hilarity of the hour, as in spite of her wonderful juvenility she is by no means a favourite. Miss Gower, however, *is*—which balances the situation.

'I don't believe I ever felt so sorry for leaving any place,' says Mrs. Chichester (who is always talking) with a soft but prolonged sigh—the sigh that is meant to be heard. She casts a languishing glance at Marryatt as she says this. He is *not* invited to the next country house to which she is bound. He returns her glance fourfold, upon which she instantly dives behind Mrs. Bethune's back, on the pretence of speaking to Margaret, but in reality to hide her face.

'Yes; I feel sorry too,' says Colonel Neilson. 'Where are you going?'

'To the Hastings,' says Mrs. Chichester, who has now emerged from behind Marian's back, with the same sad face as before. '*You* know her. Matilda Bruce!'

'Bless me! Has *she* got married?' says Colonel Neilson, who is really the kindest-hearted man alive.

'Yes; quite a year ago.'

Mrs. Bethune laughs her usual slow, cruel little laugh, that is always in some strange way so full of fascination. She, too, had known Matilda Bruce. 'I am afraid poor Mr. Hastings must have had a great many refusals,' says she. She looks at Mrs. Chichester. 'So you are going there?'

'Yes, for my sins. Fred Hastings is a very old friend of mine.'

'What a great many old friends you have,' says Mrs. Bethune softly.

'Well, it is better to have old friends than no friends'—making the retort courteous, with a beaming smile.

'I've been staying at the Hastings', too,' says Minnie Hescott, glad to show that she is within the sacred circle, even though it be on its outermost edge. 'But——' She stops.

'I know. You needn't go on,' says Mrs. Chichester. 'I've heard all about it. A terrible *ménage*, and no fires anywhere. Amy Stuart told me—she was staying with them last Christmas—that she often wished she was the roast joint in the oven, she felt so *withered up* with cold.'

'Well, marriage improves people,' says Colonel Neilson, laughing. 'Let us hope it will enlarge Mrs. Hastings' mind as to the matter of fires.'

'It will!' says Mrs. Chichester.

'But why? If——' says Margaret, leaning forward.

'Because marriage improves women, and'—Mrs. Chichester pauses, and lets her queer green eyes rest on Marryatt's—'and does the other thing for men.'

Marryatt is looking back at her as if transfixed. He is thinking of her words rather than of her. Has marriage disimproved *her* husband? Has he been a brute to her? He knows so little—she

has told him so little! At this moment it occurs to him that she has told him *nothing*.

'What are you staring at?' asks she presently. 'Is anything the matter with me? Have I straws in my hair?'

His answer is interrupted by Mr. Gower.

'Take it down,' says he. 'How can anyone tell nowadays what a woman has in her hair unless one sees?'

'Well, it's not straws, any way,' says Mrs. Chichester, with a shrug of her lean shoulders.

'It might be worse!' says Mr. Gower, who has always declared that Mrs. Chichester has dyed her hair. His tone, which is always sepulchral, attracts immediate attention, as all things sepulchral do. 'And as for Matilda Bruce, I refuse to see why you should sit upon her with such determined cruelty. I know her, and I think her a most excellent wife, and housewife, and—*mother!*'

'A mother!' says Margaret, who had known Mrs. Bruce slightly, but had not been in sympathy with her.

'Why, yes! She's got a baby,' says Mrs. Chichester. ' Didn't you hear? Nobody *does* hear much about them. For my part, I pity her about that baby! It's so awkward to have children !'

'Awkward ?'

'Yes. Nasty people go about asking their ages, especially the age of the eldest little horror, and then they can guess to a nicety how long one must have lived. It's a mean way of finding out one's age. I'm thankful *I* have no children.'

Mrs. Chichester leans back in her chair and laughs. Perhaps—*perhaps*—there is a regret in her laugh.

'I think it is the *children* who ought to be thankful,' says old Miss Gower, covering her with a condemnatory glance.

Mrs. Chichester turns her eye on her.

'Do you know, Miss Gower, you have for once hit a happy truth,' says she.

She smiles blandly on the terrible old maid. But Tita, who has just come down from her room, and has entered the hut, is struck by the queer expression in her eyes.

'You have come at last, Tita,' says Margaret, going to her.

'I have had such a headache,' says Tita, pressing her hands to her brow. 'It has worried me all day. But I came down now, hoping the air and'—sweetly looking round her—'all of you would cure it.'

'I think you ought to be lying down,' says Margaret, seeing the pallor of the young face before her, and pitying the determination, so plainly to be seen, to keep up.

'Maurice'—to Rylton, who has come on the scene a moment later than his wife, so immediately after her, indeed, that one might be forgiven for imagining he had come in her train, only for one thing, he had come from an opposite direction—
'Maurice, I think Tita should be induced to lie down for a bit. She looks tired.'

'Nonsense,' says Tita.

Her tone is almost repellent, although it is to Margaret she speaks. But in reality the tone is meant for Maurice.

'I've got a headache, certainly. But I firmly believe that it has grown out of the knowledge that you are all going to desert me to-morrow.'

This little speech, most innocently meant, she points by smiling at her cousin, Tom Hescott. She had been unkind to him down there in the shrubbery awhile ago, she tells herself, and now she is telling him in silent, sweet little ways that she meant nothing nasty, nothing cold or uncourteous.

Her husband, watching her, sees the glance, and grinds under it. He misunderstands it. As for Tom! Poor Tom! He, too, sees the pretty glance, and he, too, misunderstands it.

All at once a quick but most erroneous thought springs to life within his heart. Her glance now! Her tears awhile ago! Were they for him? Is she sorry because

he is leaving her? Is her life here unbearable?

Mrs. Bethune has risen and come up to Tita.

'You speak as if we were going to leave you to immediate destruction,' says she. 'Are you afraid of being left alone with—Maurice?'

Mrs. Chichester, who has a great deal of good in her, mixed up with a terrible amount of frivolity, comes forward so quietly that Tita's sudden whiteness is hardly seen, except by one.

'Fancy being afraid of Sir Maurice,' says she. 'Sir Maurice,' casting a laughing glance at him, '*I* shouldn't be afraid of you.'

Sir Maurice laughs back, and everyone laughs with him, and Mrs. Bethune's barb is blunted.

'I am not afraid of anything,' says Tita lightly. 'But I confess I feel very sorry at the thought of losing you all, even for a time——'

This prettily, and with a glance round her as good as an invitation for next year.

'I know you, Minnie' (to her cousin), 'are going to delightful people—and you,' turning suddenly to Mrs. Bethune, 'I hope you are going to friends?'

'Friends! I have no friends,' says Marian Bethune sombrely. 'I have learned to forbid myself such luxuries. I can't afford them. I find them too expensive!'

'Expensive?'

'Yes. A loss to me of peace of mind that can never be made up.' She smiles at Tita, a cold, unpleasant smile. 'Do you know what my definition of a friend is? Someone who takes delight in telling you all the detestable things your *other* friends have said of you.'

'I don't think much of *your* friends, any way,' says Mrs. Chichester, who as a rule is always *en évidence*. 'Do you, Sir Maurice?'

'Do I what?'

'Do you agree with Mrs. Bethune?'

'I always agree with everybody,' says Rylton, smiling.

Tita moves abruptly away.

'What a hot day it is,' says she petulantly, 'and nothing to do. Tom,' beckoning Hescott to her, 'tell us a story. Do. You used to tell beautiful ones—in—the old days.'

'Do you still long for them?' asks Mrs. Bethune, always with her supercilious smile, and in a tone that is almost a whisper, yet quite loud enough for Rylton, who is standing near, to hear.

'Do *you*?' demands Tita, turning upon her with eyes ablaze with miserable anger.

'I?' haughtily. 'What do you mean?'

Tita lifts her eyes to Rylton—*such* eyes.

'He will tell you,' says she, and with a little scornful lifting of her chin she turns away.

'Now for your story, Tom,' cries she gaily, merrily.

'You take me very short,' says Hescott,

who seems, in his present mood, which is of the darkest, to be the last man in Europe to tell an amusing tale. ‘But one occurs to me, and, of course,’ looking round him, ‘you all know it. Everyone nowadays knows every story that has and has not been told since the world began. Well, any way, I heard of a man the other day who—it is a most extraordinary thing—but he hated his wife !’

‘For goodness’ sake tell us something new,’ says Mrs. Chichester, with open disgust.

‘Isn’t that new ? Well, this man was at a prayer-meeting of some sort. There is a sort of bad man that hankers after prayer-meetings, and, of course, this was a bad man because he hated his wife. It was at the East End, and Job was the subject. Job is good for an East-End meeting, because patience is the sort of thing you must preach there nowadays if you wish to keep your houses from being set on fire ; and he heard of all the troubles of Job, and

how he was cursed—and how his children and cattle and goods had been taken from him—and *only his wife left!* That struck him—*about the wife!* “Hang it! That was a big curse!” said he. “Fancy leaving the *wife!*” And the odd part of it was,’ says Hescott, lifting his eyes and looking deliberately at Rylton, ‘that his wife was an angel, whereas he—well, *she* was the Job of *his* life. She had to endure all things at his hands.’

Rylton looks back at him, and feels his brow grow black with rage. He would have liked to take him and choke the life out of him.

‘A delightful story,’ says he, with a sneer. ‘So fresh, so *original!*’

‘Very dull, I think,’ says Mrs. Chichester, who *can’t* hold her tongue. ‘An everyday sort of thing. Lady Rylton, what do you think?’

But when they look round for her they find Tita has disappeared.

CHAPTER XLI.

HOW TITA FLINGS HERSELF UPON MARGARET'S BREAST ; AND HOW MARGARET COMFORTS HER ; AND HOW TITA PROMISES TO BE GOOD ; AND HOW SHE HAS A MEETING ' BY LAMPLIGHT ALONE.'

IT is now eleven o'clock. Margaret, who is in her own room, and has sent her maid to bed, is sitting over her fire dreaming of many things, when her door is suddenly opened and as suddenly closed, and, just as suddenly as all the rest of it, a little fragile thing runs towards her, and flings herself in a perfectly tragic fashion upon her breast, lying there prone—lost, apparently, in an unappeasable outburst of grief.

'Tita, my child, my darling! What has happened?' exclaims Margaret, pressing the girl to her. 'Do look up, my dear, and tell me. There is nothing new, surely, Tita.'

'Oh, I'm tired—I'm tired of it all!' cries Tita wildly. 'I want to be done with it. Oh, Margaret, I've said nothing, nothing! *Have I, now?*' appealing to her with great drenched eyes. 'But I can go on no longer. He hates me.'

'Oh, hush, hush, Tita!'

'He does! He was unkind to me all to-day. He is always unkind to me. He *hates* me, and he—loves her.'

'I don't think so. I don't, really. Sit down, darling,' says Margaret, in great agitation.

'I know he does. Did you see that he would hardly speak to me this evening, and—'

'I thought it was you who would not speak to him.'

'Oh no, no! I was longing to speak to him. I can't bear being bad friends with

anyone; but, of course, I could not go up to him, and tell him so; and he—what did *he* do?—he spent the whole evening with Mrs. Bethune in the conservatory.'

'Tita, I assure you he was not alone with her then. Mrs. Chichester——'

'I don't care about his being alone with her,' says Tita, whose mind is as fresh as her face. 'He was *with* her all the evening; you know he was. Oh, how I hate that woman!'

'Tita, listen——'

'Yes; I hate her. And——' She stops and lays her hands on Margaret's arm and looks piteously at her. 'Do you know,' says she, 'I used *not* to hate people. I thought once I hated my uncle, but I didn't know. It was nothing like this. It is dreadful to feel like this.'

There is poignant anguish in the young voice. It goes to Margaret's heart.

'Tita, be sensible,' says she sharply. 'Do you think all the misery of the world is yours?'

'No, no,' faintly. 'Only *my* portion is so heavy.'

She bursts into tears.

'Good heavens!' says Margaret distractedly, caressing her and soothing her. 'What a world it is! Why, *why* cannot you and Maurice see how delightful you both are? It is an enigma. No one can solve it. Tita darling, take heart. Why—why, if Marian were so bad as you think her—which I pray God she isn't—still, think how far you can surpass her in youth, in charm, in beauty.'

'Beauty!'

The girl looks up at Margaret as if too astonished to say more.

'*Certainly* in beauty,' firmly. 'Marian in her best days was never as lovely as you are. Never!'

'Ah! Now I know you love me,' says Tita very sadly. 'You alone think that.' She pauses, and the pause is eloquent. 'Maurice doesn't,' says she.

'Maurice is a fool' is on Margaret's

lips, but she resists the desire to say it to Maurice's wife, and, in the meantime, Tita has recovered herself somewhat, and is now giving full sway once more to her temper.

'After all, I don't care!' exclaims she. 'Why should I? Maurice is as little to me as I am to him. What I *do* care about is being scolded by him all day long, when I have quite as good a right to scold him. Oh, better! He has behaved badly, Margaret, hasn't he? He should never have married me without *telling* me of—of her.'

'I think he should have told you,' says Margaret, with decision. 'But I think, too, Tita, that he has been perfectly true to you since his marriage.'

'True?'

'I mean—I think—he has not shown any special attention to Marian.'

'He showed it to-night, any way,' rebelliously.

'He did not indeed. She asked him to

show her the chrysanthemums, and what could he do but go with her to the conservatory? And I particularly noticed that as he passed Mrs. Chichester he asked her to come and see them too.'

'He didn't ask me, at all events,' says Tita.

'Perhaps he was afraid; and, indeed, Tita'—very gently—'you are not so altogether blameless yourself. You talked and played cards the whole night with Mr. Hescott.'

'Oh, poor old Tom! That was only because I had been unkind to him in the morning, and because'—ingenuously—'I wanted to pay out Maurice.'

Margaret sighs.

'It is all very sad,' says she.

'It is,' says Tita, tears welling up into her eyes again—a sign of grace that Margaret welcomes.

'Well, go to bed now, darling; and, Tita, if Maurice says anything to you—anything—'

'Cross—I know!' puts in Tita.

'Promise me you will not answer him in anger, do promise me! It makes me so unhappy,' says Margaret persuasively, kissing the girl, and pressing her in her arms.

'Oh! *Does* it? I'm sorry,' says Tita, seeing the real distress on Margaret's sweet face. 'There! He may say what he likes to me, I shan't answer him back. Not a word! A syllable! I'll be as good as gold!'

She kisses Margaret fondly, and leaves the room.

Outside, in the long corridor, the lamps are beginning to burn dimly. It is already twelve o'clock. Twelve strokes from the hall beneath fall upon Tita's ear as she goes hurriedly towards her own room. It is the midnight hour, the mystic hour, when ghosts do take their nightly rounds!

This is not a ghost, however, this tall young man, who, coming up by the central staircase, meets her now face to face.

‘Tita! Is it you?’

‘Yes, yes,’ says Tita, trying to hurry past him.

If Tom has come up from the smoking-room, of course the others will be coming too, and, on the whole, she is not as well got up as usual. It is with a sort of contempt she treats the charming gown in which she is now clothed. And yet she has hardly ever looked lovelier than now, with her eyes a little widened by her late grief, and her hair so sweetly disturbed, and her little slender form showing through the open folds of the long white gown that covers her.

‘Don’t go. Don’t!’ says Tom Hescott; his tone is so full of poignant anguish that she stops short. ‘Stay a moment.’ In his despair he has caught a fold of her gown. To do him fair justice, he honestly believes that she hates her husband, and that she is thoroughly unhappy with him. Unhappy with great cause. ‘I am going —you know that, and—I have a last word

to say. I tried to say it this afternoon—out there—you know—in the shrubberies, and when you wouldn't listen—I—I respected that. I respected you. But—a time may come when you'—hurriedly—'may not always choose to live this wretched life. There will be a way out of it, Tita—a way not made by *you* !'

Tita suddenly feels very cold, chilled to her heart's core. She had listened so far as if stunned; but now she wakes, and the face of Marian Bethune seems to look with a cold sneer into hers.

'And after that,' goes on Hescott, 'if—if—' He breaks down. 'Well, if *that* comes, you know I—*love* you, Tita.'

He tries to take her hand.

'Don't touch me!' says Tita vehemently. She pushes his hand from her; such a disdainful little push. 'Oh, I thought you really *did* love me,' says she, 'but not like *this*!' Suddenly a sort of rage and of anger springs to life within her. She turns a face, singularly childish, yet with

the sad first break of womanhood upon it, to his. ‘How *dare* you love me like this?’ says she.

‘Tita, listen to me——’

‘No. Not I! You must be a *fool* to talk to me like this. Of what use is it? What good? If you loved me for ever, what good could come of it? I don’t love you! Ah!—she catches her breath and looks straight at him with an undying sense of indignation—‘Maurice was right about you, and I was wrong. He saw through you, I didn’t. I—with a little inward glance into her own feelings—‘I shan’t forgive you for *that*, either!’

‘You mean——’

‘It really doesn’t matter,’ says Tita, cruel for the first time in all her sweet young life. The light is so dim that she cannot see his face distinctly. Perhaps if she had, she would have been kinder. ‘I mean nothing. Only go; go at once! Do you *hear*?’

Her childish voice grows imperious.

'I am going,' says Hescott dully—'in the morning.'

'Oh! I'm glad'—smiting her hands together—'by the *early* train?'

'The earliest!'

Hescott's soul seems dying within him. All at once the truth is clear to him, or, at least, half of it. She may not love her husband, but, beyond all question, love for him—Hescott—has never entered into her mind.

'And a good thing too!' says Tita wrathfully. 'I hope I shall never see you here again. I could never bear to look at you after this!' She is standing trembling with agitation before him, like one full-filled with wrath. 'To-day—I shall not forget *that*. To-day—and that story'—she stops as if choking—'what did you *mean* by telling that story?' demands she, almost violently. 'Everyone there knew what you meant. It dragged me down to the ground. I hated you for it! You invented it. You *know* you did, just to

humiliate *him*! You think Maurice hates me, but he doesn't. It is a lie!" She pauses, her lovely eyes aflame. "It is a lie!" she repeats passionately.

"If so——" begins Hescott, but in so low a tone, and so dead, that she scarcely heeds it.

"And to call me an angel before them all. Ah! I could read through you. So could everyone. It was an insult! I *won't* be called an angel. I am just what Maurice is, and no more. I wonder Maurice didn't *kill* you—and he would, only you were his guest. So would I—only——"

She breaks off. The tears are running down her cheeks. She makes a little swift turn of her body towards him.

"Oh, Tom! and I did so believe in *you*!"

There is a short silence fraught with misery for one soul, at all events.

"Believe in me still," says Tom Hescott, in a queer, low tone. "Believe in me now

—and for ever—to'—with passionate fondness—‘the last moment of your life.’ He draws his breath sharply. ‘And now good-bye.’

He struggles with himself, and, failing in the struggle, catches her suddenly to his breast, and there holds her to his heart for half a minute, perhaps.

Then he releases her. It is all over. He had not even tried to kiss her. He goes swiftly past her into the gloom beyond the dying lamp, and is lost.

Tita stands as if stricken dumb. For a second only. *Then* she is conscious of a hand being laid on her arm, of her being forcibly led forward to her own room, of the door being closed behind her.

She turns and looks up at Rylton. His eyes are blazing. He is dangerously white across cheeks and nose.

‘There shall be an end of this!’ says he.

CHAPTER XLII.

HOW JEALOUSY RUNS RIOT IN OAKDEAN ; AND
HOW MARGARET TRIES TO THROW OIL UPON
THE WATERS ; AND HOW A GREAT CRASH
COMES, WITH MANY WORDS AND ONE SUR-
PRISE.

TITA has wrenched herself from his grasp.
'Of *what*?' demands she.

'Do you think you can hoodwink me any longer? There shall be an end of it —do you hear?' Rylton's face, as she now sees it in the light of the lamps in her room, almost frightens her. 'I've had enough of it!'

'I don't understand you!' says Tita, standing well away from him, her face as white as ashes.

As for *his* face—

‘Don’t you?’ violently. ‘Then I shall explain. I’ve had enough of what ruins men’s lives and honours—of what leads to—’

‘To?’ says the girl, shrinking, yet leaning forward.

‘To the devil—to the Divorce Court!’ says Rylton, with increasing violence. ‘Do you think I did not see you and him just now—you—in *his* arms! Look here!’

He seizes her arm. There is a quick, sudden movement, and she is once again free. Such a little, fragile creature! She seems to have grown a woman during this encounter, and to be now tall to him, and strong and imperious.

‘Don’t!’ says she, in a curious tone, so low as to be almost unheard, yet clear to him. ‘Don’t come near me. *Don’t!* What do you accuse me of?’

‘You know right well. Do you think the whole world—*our* world, at all events—has not seen how it has been with you and—’

He cannot go on. He pauses, looking at her. He had meant to spare her feelings ; but, to his surprise, she meets his gaze fully, and says, ‘ Well ?’ in a questioning way.

At this his rage bursts forth.

‘ Are you *quite* shameless that you talk to me like this ?’ cries he. ‘ Are you mad ?’ As he speaks, his fingers tighten on a piece of paper—evidently a letter—that he is holding in his right hand. ‘ You *must* know that I saw you with him to-night—you—in his arms—you——’

Tita turns upon him.

‘ It is you who are mad,’ says she. She goes quite close to him. ‘ He was going. He was bidding me good-bye.’ She pauses; her breath comes heavily, but she goes on : ‘ He was bidding me good-bye, and—he told me that he loved me——’

Rylton flings her from him.

‘ Do you pretend that was the first time ?’

‘ The first—the *first*?’ cries Tita

passionately. ‘Do you think — do you dare to think that——’

‘I refuse to tell you what I think. There is one thing more, however, to be said ; you shall give up all further intercourse with your cousin.’

Now, Tita had decided, during her late interview with Tom, that she would never willingly see him again ; but here and thus to be *ordered* to do her own desire is more than she can bear.

‘No, I shall not do that,’ says she.

‘You *shall*,’ says Rylton, whose temper is now beyond his control.

‘I shall *not*.’ Tita is standing back from him, her small flower-like head uplifted, her eyes on fire. ‘Oh, coward!’ cries she. ‘You do right to speak to me like this—to me, who have no one to help me.’

‘You—you !’ interrupts he. ‘Where is Hescott, then ?’

His voice, his tone, his whole air, is one great insult.

Tita stands for one moment like a marble thing transfixèd ; then :

' Tom is not *here*,' says she slowly, contemptuously, and with great meaning. ' If he were—— In the meantime, I am in your power, so far that I must listen to you. There is no one to help me. I haven't a living soul in the wide world to stand by me, and you know it.'

Here the door is thrown open, and Margaret comes in, pale, uneasy. By a mere chance she had left her room to place a letter for the early post in the box in the corridor outside, and had then seen Hescott going down the corridor (unconscious of Rylton coming up behind him)—had seen the latter's rather rough impelling of Tita into her bedroom, and—— And afraid of consequences, she had at last smothered her dreadful repugnance to interfering with other people's business, and had gone swiftly to Tita's door. Even then she was on the point of giving up—of being false to her principles — when

Tita's voice, a little high, a little strained, had frightened her. It had been followed by an angry answer from Rylton. Margaret opened the door and went in.

Tita is standing with her back to a small table, her hands behind her, resting upon it, steadyng her. She is facing Rylton, and every one of her small beautiful features breathes defiance—a defiance which seems to madden Rylton. His face is terribly white, and he has caught his under lip with his teeth—a bad sign with him.

' Maurice, it is not her fault. Tita, forgive me ! I heard—I saw—I feared something.' The gentle Margaret seems all broken up, and very agitated. After a pause, as if to draw her breath—a pause not interrupted, so great is the amazement of the two belligerents before her at her so sudden appearance—she addresses herself solely to Sir Maurice. ' She had been with me,' she begins. ' It was the merest chance her leaving me just then ; she was going to her own room.'

But Tita cuts her short.

'I forbid you, Margaret!' cries she violently. 'Be silent! I tell you I will not have myself either excused or explained. Do not arrange a defence for me. I will not be defended.'

'Let me explain, my dearest—*do* let me explain,' entreats Margaret earnestly. 'It is for your good.'

'It is not; and even if it were, I should not allow it. Besides, there is nothing to explain. I was only bidding good-bye to Tom!' She pauses, and tears spring to her eyes--tears half angry, half remorseful. 'Oh, *poor* Tom!' cries she. 'He loves me!' Her breast rises and falls rapidly, and, after a struggle with herself, she bursts out crying. 'He was my *one* friend, I think! And I was so unkind to him! I told him I should never ask him here again! I was abominable to him! And all for nothing--nothing at all. Only because he said he—*loved me!*'

She is sobbing passionately now.

‘Tita,’ says Rylton ; he takes a step towards her.

‘As for you,’ cries she wildly, putting up her hands as if to keep him far from her, ‘I wish I had been born a *beggar*. Then,’ slowly, and in a voice vibrating with scorn—‘then I should not have been chosen by *you* !’

The cut goes home. For a second Rylton winces, then his fingers close even more tightly over the paper he is holding, and a cynical smile crosses his lips.

‘You believe much in money,’ says he.

‘I have reason to do so,’ coldly. The strange smile upon his lips has caught her attention, and has killed the more vehement form of her passion. ‘It induced you to marry me ! Your mother told me so !’

‘Did she?’ He is smiling still. ‘Well, all that is at an end.’ Something in his voice makes Margaret look quickly at him, and he flings the letter he has been crushing in his hand to her. ‘Read that !’ says he.

Margaret catches it, opens it hurriedly, and reads. Her face grows very pale. She looks up.

‘ You got it ?’

‘ By the night mail, two hours ago.’

‘ What is it ?’ demands Tita imperiously.

She had taken no notice of his giving the letter to Margaret ; but now she is sure that some mystery lies in it—a mystery that has something to do with her.

Margaret regards her piteously.

‘ My dear—I——’

She breaks down, and looks now at Rylton as if reproaching him for having cast this task upon her shoulders. Rylton shakes his head.

‘ From you—it will be kinder,’ says he.

‘ *What is it ?*’ asks Tita again, taking a step towards Margaret, and holding out her hand for the letter.

‘ Your money !’ falters Margaret nervously.

‘ Yes—yes !’

‘*It is all gone!*’

‘Gone?’

‘All! There is nothing left,’ says Margaret, pale as ashes.

‘Gone!’ Tita repeats the word once or twice, as a child might, trying to learn a new syllable; she seems a little stunned. Then suddenly her whole face grows bright; it wakes into a new life as it were. ‘Is it *all* gone?’ asks she.

‘Yes, my dearest girl, I am afraid so. But you must not be unhappy, Tita; I——’

‘Oh, *unhappy!*’ cries the girl, in a high clear tone, one full of fresh, sweet courage and delight. She walks straight up to Rylton. ‘*Now I can leave you!*’ says she.

If she had been planning a revenge, she could hardly have arranged it better. Rylton looks back at her. He is silent, but she reads the disturbance of his soul in his firmly shut mouth, and the little, quick, flickering frown that draws his brows together in momentary rapidity.

He had thought many things of her, but that she should hail with rapture the ruin that seemed to give her a chance of escape from him—that thought had not been his.

In a moment, however, he has pulled himself together. He tells himself he sees at once the right course to pursue. In other words, he has decided on conquering her.

‘You shall certainly not do that,’ says he icily.

‘I shall, however.’ She almost laughs as she steps back from him, and up to Margaret. There is an air about her as though she had snapped her pretty fingers in his face. ‘Now you must help me to gain my living,’ cries she gaily. ‘“A child of the people” (I quote your mother again),’ smiling at Rylton, ‘I will go back to the people.’

‘It is not quite so bad as that,’ says Margaret, who has been studying the fatal letter with a view of tearing *some* good out of it. ‘It seems that when these specula-

tions that your uncle made with your money all failed—and these failures have been going on for years—that still he tried to keep up his credit with you by—by sacrificing all his own money, and—'

'Poor old Uncle George,' says the girl softly. For the first time she seems sorry for the misfortune that has fallen on her house. 'Perhaps I can go to him, and help him. I dare say, now he is down in the world, he might be a little kinder to me.'

'Impossible, Tita. He has gone abroad,' says Margaret, who, as she tells herself miserably, is developing into a determined liar!

Uncle George, so runs the letter, has committed suicide. Truly he has gone abroad with a vengeance, and no man knoweth whither.

Tita sighs. It is, to tell truth, a sigh of relief. Uncle George had not been palatable to her.

'Well, I can earn something.'

'You need not do that,' says Margaret. 'It seems there is from two to three hundred a year left to you that cannot be disputed. It should be sufficient for——'

'I can live on *half* that!' cries Tita eagerly.

'You shall live with me,' says Rylton, breaking in with cold anger. 'You are my wife. You shall not leave me.'

Tita makes a little gesture.

'Why waste time over it?' says she. 'I shall leave you as soon as ever I can. To-morrow. I am afraid it is too late to-night. I should have gone any way, after what you said to me just now——'

'After what *he* said to you, you mean!' bursts in Rylton violently, losing all control over his temper. 'You were going with him——'

'Maurice!' Margaret has stepped between them. 'How *dare* you speak to her like that?' says she, her calm, kind face transfigured. 'I hope to see you ashamed of yourself to-morrow. Be quiet,

Tita. *I* will look after you.' She turns again hurriedly to Rylton, who is looking very white and breathing heavily, with his eyes immovably fixed on Tita. 'She will come with me—to my house to-morrow,' says Margaret. 'You will, Tita?'

'Oh yes, to you!' cries Tita, running to her, and flinging herself into her arms. 'You are the only one who—of *his* family' —with a baleful glance at Rylton over her shoulder—'who has been kind to me!'

CHAPTER XLIII.

HOW MAURICE TELLS HIS MOTHER OF THE
GREAT FIASCO; AND HOW SHE RECEIVES
THE NEWS.

THE guests have all gone! The morning train had swallowed up the Hescotts, and the eleven o'clock had disposed of the rest. Only the Dowager Lady Rylton and Margaret still remain.

The latter has decided on going by the evening train and taking Tita with her, deeming it best to separate husband and wife for a little while, until the calamity be overpast for a few weeks, at all events. As for Tessie, she had come with a determination to linger on until Christmas with

her son and his wife, though asked for three weeks only ; and it is her son's pleasing task to be obliged now to explain to her why and wherefore she must go back at once to the old home—to The Place—to the old home partially saved from ruin by his unhappy marriage, and now doomed to a sure destruction because of the loss of the fortune that had been the primary motive in the making of that marriage.

Rylton got through the telling of his lamentable tale more easily than he could have supposed possible. Whilst walking up the stairs to his mother's room, he had tried to compose certain forms of speech that might let the whole affair 'down easy,' to quote from the modern English language, but had failed utterly. Yet, when on the spot, he had run glibly through it all—coldly—almost without feeling. And his mother had heard him as coldly, until she learned all hope was at an end—as far as Tita's thousands were concerned.

Then she gave way to hysterics !

And even now, when, by the help of a wet sponge and a maid and a bottle of champagne, he has pulled her through, sufficient at all events to be able to talk rationally, she is still in the very lowest depths of despair.

‘ And to think you should have sacrificed yourself for a mere “ person ” like that ! A little — sob — ‘ wretched *nobody*. Oh ! if your father could only see you now ! A creature of no family, no manners, no—— ’

‘ Who are you talking of, mother ? My father ? ’

‘ If you can be frivolous at this moment, Maurice, you can be frivolous for ever,’ says his mother, weeping (presumably) behind her little lace rag, her voice like a dagger.

‘ I’m far from that,’ says Maurice, flinging himself into a chair. ‘ But the fact is, mother, let us leave Tita out of this affair. I object to hearing her—er—criticised by you—or anyone.’

Tessie weeps afresh.

'The soul of honour,' breathes she, apostrophizing the ceiling. 'But I cannot let you, Maurice, be so deceived by a mere swindler such as she is. Do you for a moment imagine—ah yes!' throwing up her hands and plainly admiring Maurice with great fervour—'you probably do; you have a soul, Maurice, a great soul, inherited from *me!* But I shall not permit that little vulgar fraud of a girl to demoralize it. Of course she knew all about her uncle's speculations—peculations they should be called—and married you gladly, knowing what the end would be. Oh! my poor boy!'

Lady Rylton retires again behind the lace rag.

'That will do,' says Maurice curtly.

It seems almost funny to him that he, who has been condemning Tita all the night and morning in his heart, can now be so violently angry with another fellow-creature for decrying her.

'Of course, I know. I understand,' says Tessie, still weeping, 'it is always so painful to know that one has been thoroughly taken in. No wonder you can't listen even to your own mother with common patience. I excuse you, Maurice. I often had to excuse your dear father. Both you and he were a little weak—a little noble, perhaps—but well, you required someone to look after you. And I—poor, *poor* I—what could I do?' Tessie shakes her head mournfully from side to side. 'And as for this miserable little deception——'

'Look here, mother——'

'Oh! I know, I know. It is not the nice thing to do, of course, but alone with one's only son one may waive a point and condole with him on the abominable qualities of the woman he has chosen to be his wife—— Dear Maurice, you should be careful. Didn't you *see* that footstool? I quite thought you kicked it. And her laugh. Do you know it used to hurt me?'

'Not until after our marriage, however,' says Rylton, who is now a little strung.

'Oh! no wonder you reproach me,' says his mother. 'I shall for ever reproach myself. *Such* a person—without a penny—to fling herself into your arms.'

'Ah! she had a penny then,' says Maurice.

'Then? Yes! Do you think I should have countenanced your marriage otherwise?'

'My dear mother, of course not. I know you too well for that.'

His irony is thrown away upon Tessie, who is not equal to these drags upon her intellect, and as a fact Rylton is scarcely listening to her; his whole soul is in a turmoil. He scarcely knows what he wants or what he does not want—whom he loves or hates. Only Tita—Tita is always before him; and as hate is stronger than love, as some folk have it (though they lie), he believes that all his thoughts grow with a cruel persistence of detesta-

tion towards the small, ill-tempered child whom he has married.

'At all events *she* knew what she was about,' says Tessie, flinging down her handkerchief and speaking with a touch of viciousness. 'She knew perfectly how she stood with her wretched uncle before she married you. No doubt they arranged it between them. She was fully aware of the state of her finances, and so was the uncle. So glad that miserable old person is out of the way for ever, of making young men of family marry young women of no family, who have not even money to recommend them. I must say your—*I shudder* to utter the word, Maurice—your wife—is as thoroughly dishonest a person as—' Tessie pauses, and casts a furtive glance at him. 'After all, there may be a hope for you, Maurice. That cousin! So *prononcée* the whole thing—so unmistakable. And once a divorce was established—'

She never knew afterwards what really

happened. Perhaps, after all, nothing happened—nothing material ; but what she does know is that Maurice is standing before her, looking like a demon.

‘ D——n it !’ says he. His temper is *very* bad sometimes. ‘ Can’t you *see* that I won’t have a word said against her ?’

CHAPTER XLIV.

HOW MATTERS COME TO A CLIMAX ; AND HOW TITA TELLS MAURICE MANY THINGS THAT STING HIM SHARPLY ; AND HOW HE LAYS HANDS UPON HER ; AND HOW THE LAST ADIEUX ARE SAID.

‘So you have made up your mind,’ says Maurice, looking at his wife with a glance as full of coldness as it is of rage. ‘You see your way ? It is for ever, remember. You decide on leaving me ?’

‘Why should I stay ?’ says Tita.

There is evidently no idea of ‘staying’ about her ; she is dressed for a journey, with care—*great* care—but with all the air of one who is going away for a long, long

time. She is exquisitely dressed ; the soft gray costume, trimmed with costly furs, sets off her bijou figure to perfection, and her soft, dainty curls show coquettishly from beneath her fur cap. Her eyes are shining like stars ; her lips have taken a slightly malicious curve ; her rounded chin, soft and white as a baby's, is delicately tilted. She is looking lovely. ‘ Why should I stay ?’ Her question seems to beat upon his brain. He could have answered it, perhaps, had pride permitted him, but pride is a great tyrant, and rules with an iron rod. And, besides, even if he had answered, *she* has a tyrant, too—her own pride. As a fact we all have these tyrants, and it is surprising how we hug them to our breasts.

‘ Why should I stay ?’ says Tita. ‘ All you wanted from me is gone ; now I go too. You should rejoice. If you have lost in one way you have gained in another. You will never see me or my money again !’

The bitterness in the young voice, the hatred in the young eyes, is terrible.

For a full minute Rylton remains silent. The mind is a strange thing, not to be controlled, full of vagaries, and now, for no reason whatever, as it seems to him, it has run back to his wedding morning. Is *this* the careless, idle, little tomboy who had stood before the altar—the little girl he had assured himself he could mould to his will?

‘ You forget,’ says he coldly, ‘ that you are married to me. It is not so simple a matter as you seem to imagine for a wife to throw off her marriage yoke.’

‘ Yoke! What a good word that is!’ says Tita, with the air of one making a discovery. Then lightly, ‘ Pouf! Nonsense! I’ll show you how easy it is! And as for that——’ Again her mood changes. ‘ Don’t go in for that sort of thing,’ says she contemptuously. ‘ Be honest with me now, at the last. You know you will be as glad to get rid of me, as I shall be to be rid of you.’

'Speak for yourself,' says Rylton slowly. His eyes are on the ground. 'I have not said I shall be glad to get rid of you.'

'No, I have said it for you. I have befriended you to the very end ; and if you *will* be a hypocrite, why—*be it !*' cries she gaily.

She throws up her hands with an airy little gesture, full of grace, and anger, and something else difficult to describe, but that certainly is devoid of any sort of mirth.

'Hypocrite or not, remember this,' says Maurice, 'it is *you* who have decided on a separation.'

'Yes ; I—I.' She bursts out laughing. '"Alone I did it!" To-day I set you free !'

'Free !'

'Ah, not so free as I *would* make you !' shaking her head.

He looks at her.

'*You* are honest, at all events,' says he

bitterly ; then, after a moment, ‘ You approve, then, of the step you are taking ?’

Tita makes a gesture of impatience.

‘ What *will* you have ?’ says she. ‘ What do you find fault with now ? Have I not behaved well ? Have I not behaved beautifully ? I stayed with you as long as I had any money—the money for which you gave me your—title. I cannot flatter myself that you gave me more than that for it. Probably you gave me too much. And so now, when the money is gone, the bargain is off, and’—with a shrug of her shoulders, and the saucy glance of a naughty child from under her long lashes—‘ *I am off too ! Isn’t that being good ?*’

‘ Have you no charity ?’ says he. A dark red flush has crimsoned his forehead. ‘ What a character you give me ! Do you think I have no heart ?’

‘ Oh, *your* heart !’ says she gaily. ‘ I don’t think you need be unhappy about it. It will do. You say I am honest, and one thing honestly I do regret, that I should

have unwittingly tempted you to marry me because of my money—when now it has all dropped overboard. If I had only known how you regarded it, I——'

'That infernal money!' says he violently.

There is almost a groan in his voice. His eyes are fixed on her; he is wondering at her. What a child she looks in her pretty frock! What an unreasonable child! But what a charm in the angry eyes of her, the defiance of her whole air! There is something that maddens him in the scornful shrug of her dainty shoulders.

'Oh yes—yes—of course!' says she, bringing the little disdainful shrug into full requisition now. 'No wonder you abuse it, poor thing! *But* for that "infernal money," you would never have dreamed of marrying me, and now that it is gone—gone——' She pauses. 'Oh,' sharply, 'I am *glad* it is gone! It opens for me a way to leave you!'

Rylton strides forward, and seizes her by both her arms.

'Supposing I don't *let* you go!' says he.

'I shan't ask your permission,' returns she calmly, submitting to his violent pressure without a wince—a pressure unmeant—unknown by him, to do him justice. 'And I need not! Think of the detestable life we have lived together! Don't I know that you hated it as much as I did—perhaps more! No,' softly. 'Not more!'

Rylton loosens his hold of her, and steps back. If she had said a thousand words, they could not have brought her meaning more forcibly home to him than these two, 'Not more.'

'Oh, think!' cries she, clasping her hands in a sort of ecstasy. 'To-day—this very day—in an hour or so, we shall be miles, and miles, and *miles* away from each other! What more can you desire?'

Rylton brings his hand down upon the table before him.

'Nothing!' returns he hoarsely. 'I would rather die than subject myself to the

misery I have been enduring with you. I would, by heaven !'

' Ah, you speak the truth at last,' says she. ' Well'—she moves towards him and holds out her hand—' now that you have spoken, I am satisfied. Good-bye; I hope I shall never see you again !'

He thrusts her hand aside.

' I shall remember that,' says he.

' That was why I said it,' returns she. She has flung up her head, angered a little perhaps even in this desperate moment at his rejection of her hand. Her eyes are gleaming. Her beauty seems to shine out—to grow upon him. Maurice regards her curiously even now—now, when she is going for ever. *How* can so bitter a spirit dwell in so sweet a temple? ' Will you not say good-bye, then ?' says she.

' No—never.'

She turns away deliberately and leaves the room.

CHAPTER XLV.

HOW MARGARET STEPS INTO THE BREACH,
AND LEARNS THAT ALL PEACEMAKERS ARE
NOT BLESSED.

'It is quite the wisest thing to be done at present,' says Margaret. 'I do hope, Maurice, you will not object to the arrangement.'

She regards him anxiously. It is an hour later, and the carriage has been ordered to be at the door in fifteen minutes. Margaret has come to bid Maurice good-bye, and say a few words to him.

'*I*! What have I got to do with it?' he laughs contemptuously. '*She* has arranged everything. The farther she goes from

me the better. I am sorry that the resting-place she has chosen is so near. Park Lane as usual, I suppose, Margaret? But it won't last, my dear girl. She will go farther afield soon.'

' You think her fickle, I don't,' says Margaret gravely. ' You have misjudged her all along. I believe she loves me. I believe,' slowly, ' she has a great capacity for loving.'

' Are you alluding to her capacity for loving Mr. Hescott ?'

' That is unworthy of you,' says his cousin. She rises. ' I have only a few moments—and your wife is coming with me, and I would say one word to you before I go. She is young—*very* young. She is a mere child.'

' She is old enough, I presume, to know right from wrong.'

' She is the youngest creature I know,' persists Margaret, in her sweet angelic way, that is all charity, all kindness and all forbearance. ' And what a little fairy

of a thing! A man should have patience with her. *Have* patience, Maurice.'

'Oh! All you women support each other,' says he, frowning. 'You wish me to believe that because Nature has built her in a smaller mould than other women, I should therefore condone her faults.'

'Such pretty faults,' says Margaret. 'A little hot temper, a little sauciness, a little petulance—what more?'

Rylton's lip curls.

'If you are such a devotee at her shrine as all that comes to, there is nothing more to be said. Her flirtation with her cousin——'

'*Was* it a flirtation?'

'There are new names for things every day. Give it the new name and be done with it.'

'There can be no new name for a mere imagination. I don't believe she ever had any—any love affair with Mr. Hescott. I don't really, and,' boldly, 'in your heart I don't think you believe it either. No,

don't turn away, *don't*. It is for your sake I speak, because I have always your interest at heart ; Maurice, I entreat you to pause, to think. Is all the fault on Tita's side ? Have you loved her as she should be loved ?—that little, quick, enthusiastic creature. Where has your heart been since your marriage !

' You go very far,' says Rylton, pale, cold.

' I know ; I know. And I am only a cousin, a mere nobody. But I love the child, and I *must* speak. You will hate me for it, perhaps, but why has Marian been here ?'

' Tita asked her.'

' Is that the whole truth ?'

' No ; the half,' says Sir Maurice. He rouses himself from the lethargy into which he has fallen, and looks at Margaret. ' I promised Marian an invitation here : I asked Tita for that invitation later. Marian came. I believed there would be harm in her coming, and I steeled myself against it. I tell you, Margaret—I tell

you, and you only—that when she came the harm—was—well'—straightening himself—‘there was *no* harm. All at once I found I did not care. My love for her seemed dead. It was terrible, but it was the fact ; I seemed to care for nothing—nothing at all. Margaret, believe me, it was all dead. I tell you this, that the night when I discovered that, I longed for death as a solution of my misery. To care for nothing—nothing !

‘There was something,’ says Margaret.
‘There was Tita !’

‘Was there ?’

‘Certainly there was.’

‘She has proved it,’ says Rylton, breaking into a sort of heart-broken mirth.

‘She is angry now,’ says Margaret eagerly. ‘She is very naturally—unhinged ; and she has been told——’

‘By my mother ?’

‘Yes. That was unfortunate. She—Tessie—your mother,’ hastily, ‘should not have told her.’

'After all, I'm glad she did,' says Rylton warmly. 'What does it matter? And, at all events, it makes the thing clear to Tita. It is quite as well that she should know that I was a cur of the worst description when I asked her to marry me.'

'You were never that,' says his cousin, tears rising in her eyes. 'You have been wrong in many ways, but I still believe in you, and I think that when you married Tita you meant to be true to her.'

'I did, God knows!' says he. 'It was the least I could do, considering how I had taken advantage of her. But she——'

'Well?' says Margaret.

'Hescott——'

'Oh, Maurice, don't! *Don't* be unjust over that. I tell you there was nothing in that. The poor child has been foolish, faulty, absurd, in many ways, but daylight is not sweeter or more pure. I tell you this as my last word. And, Maurice, in time—in a month or so—come and see us——'

‘Us? Her? No?’

‘Come and see me, then. I shall be, as you know, in town. *Do* come.’

‘Well, let me know first that she won’t be there.’

‘I shall arrange for you not to see her, if you wish that,’ says Margaret, deeply grieved in her kind spirit. ‘But I hope that in time——’

‘If you are hoping that Tita and I shall ever make it up again, you are the most hopeful person alive,’ says he. ‘No—I tell you plainly—I shall go to see you when she is away, never when she is with you.’

‘But why? You certainly can’t believe she has any *tendresse* for Mr. Hescott.’

‘Why should I not believe it?’ gloomily.

‘Why should you? Dear Maurice, be sensible. I *know* that Tita cares nothing for him.’

‘How? Has she told you?’

‘Not told me. But one can see.’

‘So can another one.’ He throws up

his head suddenly, as if tired and altogether done. ‘There! I give it up,’ says he. ‘I have married an enigma, apparently, and my blood must be on my own head.’

‘You have married one of the sweetest girls on earth,’ says Margaret indignantly, stung by his nonchalant demeanour. ‘You are unworthy of her—you are not capable of understanding her.’ Rylton shrugs his shoulders. ‘In time—in *time*,’ says the gentle Margaret, now all aglow with anger, ‘you will learn her worth; but as it is——’

She moves towards the door. Rylton hurries to open it for her.

‘I may come and see you?’ asks he.

‘If you will, but I shall certainly not send Tita out of the way to oblige you.’

‘Well, I shall take my chance.’

‘It is in your own hands.’

Margaret sweeps past him. She is at this moment nearly as angry with him as Tita is.

CHAPTER XLVI.

HOW MARGARET AND TITA TREAD MANY PATHS ; AND HOW FORTUNE, HAVING TURNED HER BACK ON TITA, SHOWS A SMILING FRONT TO MAURICE.

IT is six months later, and now fair May has come to us on young and eager feet. On young feet barely born, and with a smile so slight that one dare hardly call it sunshine At this moment a little gleam of it, just strong enough to make one dream of summer, but not enough to warm one, is stealing timidly through the windows of Margaret's smaller drawing-room in Park Lane.

She had taken Tita abroad almost im-

mediately after the rupture at Oakdean, explaining to their mutual friends that it was necessary for Tita's health that she should winter in the south. An explanation received face to face with delicate appreciation and warm sympathy, and much laughed over later on. Poor old Margaret! As if one didn't *know*! As if one couldn't *see*! That cousin, you know! He was—he really *was* far too good-looking. And then this sudden loss of fortune! After all, these unequal marriages never *do*. Rylton plainly was tired of her, and when the money went—well, then Margaret took her off his hands. Of course Margaret was better than the cousin—more respectable. This brilliant bit of wit was received with much soft smothered mirth. But as for Rylton—he certainly had not come well out of it. A fellow should stick to his bargain, any way. He had married her for her money, and that gone, had shaken himself free. It was certainly playing it a little low down. By

the way, wouldn't Mrs. Bethune be singing hymns over it all! *Such* a downfall to her rival! There was a good deal of gossip about it, here and there.

Mrs. Chichester, who has a heart somewhere in her lean, frivolous body, had come all the way up from Devonshire, where she was then falsely beguiling a most unlucky young curate, to see Margaret, on the latter's way through town, and express her sorrow for Tita. She had honestly liked Tita, and she said to Margaret many kindly things about her. So many, and so kindly indeed, that Margaret almost forgave her that reprehensible flirtation with Captain Marryatt. But then Margaret, at that time, knew nothing of the luckless curate!

The greatest surprise of all, however, came from old Miss Gower. Popularly she had been supposed to hate Tita, and resent her marriage with Rylton, who was a relative of hers; but five days after the *fiasco*, as Randal called it, Rylton had a letter from her that somewhat startled him.

It was extremely abusive, and rather involved; but the meaning of it was that he ought to be ashamed of himself, and that Tita was too good for him. She wound up with a few very rude remarks directed at Mrs. Bethune, and a hope that Tita would stick to her determination to cast off the tyrant—*Man* (the capital was enormous), as personified by Maurice.

Rylton wasn't in the least annoyed by this letter; indeed, it somewhat puzzled him to find that he rather liked it, and he put it away in his private drawer, amongst the papers he cared for.

Margaret had taken Tita to Rome, and thence to Constantinople. She had kept her moving about from place to place, hoping to clear her mind of all past deadly thoughts by constant change. She had a hope that by breaking off all old associations, the girl might come to think of the past—and Maurice—in a more gentle, lenient light, and thus be prepared for a reconciliation in the future. To Margaret

it seemed terrible that these two young people should be for ever apart—their lives ruined, their social position smirched.

A long separation from her own country—her own circle—might lead Tita to desire a return to it—a return to her husband and her home.

Alas! not to the old home, however. She might desire a return to that with all her soul, yet nothing would come of it. It was gone! Gone past recall! When Tita's affairs were wound up, it was found that all should be sold, not only her other two houses, but the old home—the one beloved of her childhood. Oakdean came to the hammer a month ago!

Indeed, out of all her large fortune only a bare £300 a year was saved for the poor little heiress of yesterday! When Tita was assured that even this small sum was honourably hers, she had insisted on her lawyers writing and offering half of it to Maurice—an offer I need hardly say refused. Maurice declined, naturally, but,

unfortunately, very rudely, to touch a penny of hers.

So far Tita was protected from actual poverty—poverty was much closer to Maurice at this time than to her; and, indeed, being with Margaret, who loved her from her heart, and would hear no word of her leaving her, hardly felt the change in her position. The loss of the old home—of Oakdean—had been, so far as Margaret could see, the one thing that had deeply affected her. Of Maurice she would hardly talk at all, but of Oakdean she would talk by the hour.

The wheels of law grind slowly, and it was not until last month that the actual sale of her beautiful home took place. The news came to her when she and Margaret were at Berne on their homeward way, and she had quite broken down. She had cried terribly over it night and day—so much, indeed, that Margaret, who had been astonished at her strength of mind over her loss of fortune, now began to regard

her as devoid of it altogether. For days and days she fretted, eating scarcely anything, caring for nothing. It was when Margaret was almost in despair about her that she grew better, and let herself be amused by the ordinary occurrences of the day.

As for Rylton, these past six months had been the fullest of his life. Time had made him his shuttlecock. Fortune had played with him. It had caught him when he was up in the world and flung him to the ground, and after that had seized him afresh, and sent him flying to a higher altitude than he had ever known before. As a fact, three months had not elapsed after his parting with his wife when his uncle (a comparatively young man) had died of typhoid fever, leaving him all his property.

It seemed the very irony of fate. A year ago, if he had had this money, he would not have even *seen* Tita. The marriage was an arrangement of his

mother's, and now that he has got this money, of what good is it to him? His wife is gone, yet he still is wedded. The first sense of comfort he got from his newly-acquired fortune was the thought that he could now give Tita some of it.

But Tita would none of it! The very fact that their cases had been so suddenly and so marvellously reversed made her the more strong in her determination to spurn any gift from him. She was now sitting on the lowest rung of Fortune's ladder, whilst he stood at the top; but, for all that, she would take nothing from him. Rylton wrote to Margaret, who scolded Tita vigorously to no end; and so the matter stood. The first instalment of a very magnificent allowance was paid into Tita's bank, and rested there untouched, doing no good to anybody.

'It is senseless! As his wife, you are entitled to some of his money. It is not a gift,' said Margaret angrily.

But Tita had laughed, and torn his letter to Margaret in two.

'He wouldn't take my small gift,' said she, alluding to that offer of hers of the half of her tiny income. 'And now it does me *good* to be able to refuse his big one.'

'But it isn't a gift; it is your right,' Margaret urged again; but all in vain.

Now they are back once more in England. Ten days ago they arrived, and are this morning in Margaret's pretty room that is half filled with growing plants, moving about from this flower to that, and feeling unconsciously little thrills of delight in the fresh sweetness of the morning.

'Spring goeth all in white,
Crowned with milk-white May;
In fleecy flocks of light,
O'er heaven the white clouds stray.'

'White butterflies in the air,
White daisies prank the ground;
The cherry and the hoary pear
Scatter their snow around.'

Well, there are no cherry-trees or hoary pear-trees here, but the perfume of the

delicate lilac comes to them from the Park, telling them that spring is reigning, even in this dusty old city, with a right royal gaiety.

Twice during these ten days Rylton has called, always asking scrupulously for Margaret; and Margaret only has he seen. Hescott had called once, but Tita would not see him either, and poor Margaret had a rather dreadful interview with him. He had offered her in a frantic, foolish moment, half of all he was worth to be given from him to Tita, and Margaret had a good deal of difficulty in explaining to him that Tita, in reality, was as well off as any young woman need be. Margaret even exaggerated somewhat, and told him that she had a large sum lying idle in a bank—as indeed she had, considering Rylton paid in his princely allowance to her, with determined punctuality, every month, in spite of his knowledge of the fact that she would not touch it. Margaret suffered a good deal through Hescott, and was devoutly

grateful when she learned the morning after his visit to her that he had started for a prolonged tour in South Africa. She learned this from himself in a somewhat incoherent letter, and a paragraph in the papers the day after set her mind at rest. Margaret was a Christian, or she might have found consolation in the thought that there are lions in South Africa!

She watched Tita anxiously for a day or two after this, but could not see that the girl was distressed at Tom's departure. She talked of him, indeed, very freely—always a good sign.

* * * * *

'Tita, do you hear the birds?' says Margaret, in quite a little excited way.
'Come here to this window. How they sing!'

'Don't they!' says Tita rapturously.

Her face lights up, but presently she looks a little sad.

'It makes you long for the country?'

asks Margaret gently, looking at her without seeming to do so.

'No,' says Tita, shaking her head resolutely; and then: 'Yes—yes. But I shall always hate to go to it now—now that the dear old home is gone.'

'I wish I had been able to buy it!' says Margaret regretfully.

'Oh, Meg, don't go on like that! You—you who have been everything to me!'

'I wasn't rich enough,' says Margaret ruefully; 'and, at all events, I wasn't in time. I confess now I sold out some shares a little time ago with a view to getting it, but I was too late; it was bought—a private sale, they said.'

'There is nothing I can say—nothing,' says Tita, tears dimming her eyes. 'Why are you so good to me? Oh, Meg! there is one, one thing—I love you, and love you, and love you!' She slips her soft arms round Margaret's neck, and presses her cheek to hers. There is moisture on Margaret's face when this little burst of

gratitude has been accomplished. ‘I never loved anyone as I love you,’ says Tita.

‘There is someone else you ought to love better, Tita.’

‘There is someone else I *hate*,’ returns Tita, with really astonishing promptitude.

‘Well, about Oakdean,’ says Margaret quickly, appalled by this outbreak of wrath.

‘There is nothing about it; it is gone,’ says Tita, in a forlorn sort of way; then: ‘I wonder who bought it?’

‘I don’t know. I asked, but I could not find out. Some rich merchant, no doubt.’

‘Well,’ sighing, ‘a rich merchant bought it before—my poor father—and to a rich merchant it has gone. That is as it should be. Still, it was so pretty, so lovely, so homelike, that I wish——’

‘What, darling?’

‘That it had been burnt to the ground before anyone else got it,’ breaks out Tita, in a little storm of grief and despair.

‘Yes, I know; I can feel with you,’

says Margaret, pressing her back into a chair, and hovering over her with loving touches and tender words. ‘But, after all, Tita, one has to give up things daily. It is life. Life is one long surrender.’

‘My surrender has been done in a bundle,’ says Tita indignantly. ‘Other people do their surrenders by degrees, year after year; but in *one* year I have lost everything—my home, my money, my husband.’

Margaret notes with fear that she has put her husband last in the list of her losses.

‘Not that I care a fig about Maurice,’ continues Tita, with a tilt of her chin that would have made any man admire her. ‘I was delighted to get rid of *him*.’ Then, glancing at Margaret, she flings her arms round her neck again. ‘No; don’t look at me like that. I’m a wretch. But *really*, Margaret, you know that Maurice was a wretch, too !’

‘Well, well !’ says Margaret sadly. ‘It

seems useless to defend Maurice—you know how sorry I am for you always,' she goes on gently. 'To come from riches to poverty is one of the worst things the world offers; but to be very rich is not well, Tita. It clogs the mind; it takes one away from the very meaning of life. Money hardens the soul; it keeps one away from touch with the inner circle of humanity—from the misery, the sorrow, the vice! It is bad to be too rich.'

'Yet you are rich, Margaret!'

'Yes—yes; and it frightens me,' says she, in a low tone.

Tita rubs her cheek softly against hers.

'Yet *you* are not far from the kingdom of God!' says she.

The little kittenish gesture and the solemn phrase! Margaret presses Tita to her. What a strange child she is! What a mixture!

'Neither are you, I trust,' says she.

'So you see riches have got nothing to

do with it,' says Tita, breaking into a gay, irresistible little laugh.

Miss Knollys laughs too, in spite of herself, and then grows suddenly very grave. There is something she must say to Tita.

CHAPTER XLVII.

HOW MARGARET STARTS AS A SPECIAL PLEADER, AND IS MUCH WORSTED IN HER ARGUMENT ; AND HOW A SIMPLE KNOCK AT THE HALL DOOR SCATTERS ONE BEING WHO DELIGHTS IN WAR.

‘ I THINK you ought to see your husband,’ says Margaret.

It is a bombshell ! Tita withdraws her arms from round Margaret’s neck and looks at her like one seeing her for the first time. It is plain to Margaret that she is very angry.

Poor Margaret ! She feels torn in twain. Rylton, as has been said, had called twice during the past ten days, but on neither

of those occasions had seen Tita. Tita, indeed, had obstinately refused to come downstairs, even though Margaret had gone up to fetch her. Margaret had not forgotten that occasion. She had found the girl in her room.

'Never, never, never!' said Tita, in answer to all her entreaties, who had screwed herself into the farthest corner of her room between a wardrobe and a table — a most uncomfortable position, but one possessed of certain advantages. It would be difficult, for example, to dislodge her from it. And she gave Margaret the impression, as she entered the room, that she thought force was about to be resorted to.

'It is your duty to come downstairs and see him,' Margaret had said.

She always brought in poor Duty, who certainly must have been fagged to death at that time.

'I hate him!' said Tita rebelliously, and now with increased venom, as she

saw that Margaret only had come to the assault. ‘Go down and tell him that.’

‘This is dreadful,’ said poor Margaret, going to the door.

But even now the little miscreant wedged in between the furniture was not satisfied.

‘Tell him I hope I’ll never see him again!’ said she, calling it out loudly as though afraid Margaret might not hear and deliver her words.

‘I shall certainly deliver no such message,’ said the latter, pausing on the threshold and waxing wroth. Even the worm will turn, they say, though I confess I never saw one that did. ‘You can tell him that yourself, some day, when you see him! ’

But this parting shaft had only made Tita laugh. ‘*See him!* She would die first! ’

Margaret had gone down with a modified edition of this *rencontre* to Rylton, and Rylton had shrugged his shoulders. He could not disguise from Margaret the

fact, however, that he was chagrined. He had seen through the modifying, of course, and had laughed—not very merrily—and told Margaret not to ruin her conscience on *his* account. He had lived with Tita long enough to know the sort of message she would be sure to send.

Margaret mumbled something after that, never very clear to either of them, and Rylton had gone on to say that he was going down to the country for a month. He was starting on Monday next. He had said all that on Thursday, and this is Tuesday. There is a sense of relief, yet of regret, in Margaret's heart as she tells herself that he is well out of town. But now, certainly, is the time to work on Tita's sense of right and wrong. Rylton will come back at the end of the month, and when he does, surely—surely his wife should be willing to, at all events, receive him as a friend. The gossip surrounding these two people, so dear to her, is dis-

tressing to Margaret, and she would gladly have put an end to it. The whole thing, too, is so useless, so senseless. And as for that affair of Marian Bethune's—she has no belief in that. It has blown over—is dead. Killed—by time.

'See him?' says Tita at last, stammering.

'Yes, when he comes back. You have a month to think about it. He has gone to the country.'

'A very good thing too,' says Tita, with a shrug of her shoulders. 'I hope he will stay there.'

'But he won't,' says Margaret in despair. 'He returns to town in June. Tita, I hope—I do hope you will be sensible, and consent to see him then.'

'Does he want to see me?' asks Tita.

Here Margaret is posed. Rylton had certainly *known*, that day she had gone up to Tita's room to bring her down, what her errand was, but he had not asked her

to go upon it. He had expressed no desire, had shown no wish for a meeting with his wife.

‘ My dear—I—’

‘ Ah, you make a bad liar, Meg !’ says Tita ; ‘ you ought to throw up the appointment. You aren’t earning your salary honestly. And, besides, it doesn’t matter. Even if he were *dying* to see me, I should still rather die than see him.’

‘ That is not a right spirit, Tita, to—’

‘ I expect my spirit is as right as his,’ says Tita rebelliously, ‘ and,’ with a sudden burst of indignation that does away with all sense of her duty to her language, ‘ a thousand times righter for the matter of that. No, Margaret ! No—no—no ! I will *not* see him. Do you think I ever forget—’

‘ I had hoped, dearest, that—’

‘ It is useless to hope. *What* woman would forgive it ? I knew he married me without loving me. That was all fair ! He told me that. What he did not tell

me was the vital thing—that he loved someone else.'

'You should never have married him when he told you he did not love you.'

'Why not?' warmly. 'I knew nothing of love; I thought he knew nothing of it either. Love seemed to me a stupid sort of thing (it seems so still). I said to myself that a nice strong friendship would be sufficient for me—'

'Well?'

'Well, so it would—only he felt no friendship. He felt nothing but his love for that odious woman! I couldn't stand that.'

'You stood it for a long time, Tita—if it ever existed.'

'Yes; I know. I didn't seem to care much at first, but when he grew rude to me about Tom—— Well, I knew what *that* meant.'

'If you knew, you should have kept your cousin at a greater distance.'

'Nonsense, Margaret! what do you mean

by that?' Tita has turned a pair of lustrous eyes upon her—eyes lit by the fire of battle—not battle with Margaret, however, but with memory. 'You honestly think that he believed I was in love with Tom?'

'I do. And I think he was jealous.'

Tita bursts out laughing. There is little music in her mirth.

'And now I'll tell you what *I* think. That he was *glad* to pretend to believe I was in love with Tom, because he hoped to get rid of me, and after that to marry his cousin.'

'Tita! I shall not listen to you if you say such things. How dare you even think them? Maurice is incapable of such a design.'

'In my opinion, he is capable of anything,' retorts Maurice's wife, without a trace of repentance. She looks long at Margaret, and then dropping gracefully upon a *pouf* at Margaret's feet, says sweetly, 'He's a beast!'

'Oh, Tita! I don't know *why* I love you,' says Margaret, with terrible reproach.

At this Tita springs to her feet, and flings her arms round Miss Knollys. Presently she leans back and looks at her again, still, however, holding her with her arms. Her small face, so woeful a while ago, is now wreathed in smiles ; it even suggests itself to Margaret that she is with difficulty suppressing a wild outbreak of mirth—a suppression meant, no doubt, as a concession to Margaret's feelings.

'I'll tell you,' whispers she. ' You love me because you would be the most ungrateful wretch on earth unless you did. You give me *some* of your love ; I give you all mine. I have no one else.'

'That is your own fault,' says Margaret, still trying to scold her, actually believing she is doing it, whilst with her eyes and mouth she is smiling at her.

'Not another word, not one,' says Tita. 'And promise me you won't ask me to see him again. I hate him ! He sets my

nerves on edge. I think he is actually ugly.'

'I think you must have forgotten what he is like by this time.'

'No, I don't. One doesn't forget a nightmare in a hurry.'

'Tita, really—'

'There! I'll be good. I'll consign him to the lowest depths and never dig him up again. And so he has left town? What a blessed relief! Now I can go out and enjoy myself. *Let us* go out, Meg! Let us—*what's that?*'

She stands transfixed in the middle of the room, Margaret opposite her. Both seem stricken into marble.

A knock at the door, loud, sharp, resounding—a knock well known to both.

'And you *said* he was gone to the country,' says Tita, in a low whisper filled with deepest suspicions.

'He said so. I believed it. It must be a mistake,' says Margaret. 'He *certainly* said so.'

They have lost some moments over their fear and astonishment. The sound of a rapidly approaching footstep, quite as well known to them as the knock, rouses both to a sense of desperation.

'What on earth shall I do?' says Tita, who is now as white as a sheet.

'Stay and see him,' says Margaret, with sudden inspiration.

'Stay! Do you think I should stay for one moment in the room with him? No! I shall go in there,' pointing to the next room that opens out of this with folding-doors, 'and wait until he goes away.'

She has hardly time to reach this seclusion when the door is thrown wide, and Sir Maurice is announced.

'Nobody with you?' says he, glancing somewhat expectantly around him. 'I fancied I heard someone. *So glad to find you alone!*'

'Yes—yes—perhaps it is better,' says Margaret vaguely, absently, thinking

always of the little firebrand in that room beyond, but so near, so fatally near.

‘ Better? You mean——’

‘ Well, I mean that Tita has only just left the room,’ says Margaret desperately.

‘ She—is in there, then?’ pointing towards the folding-doors.

‘ Yes. *Do* speak low. You know she—I can’t disguise from you, Maurice, that she——’

Margaret hesitates.

‘ Hates me? I’m quite aware of that.’
A long pause. ‘ She is well, I hope?’ frigidly.

‘ I think so. She looks well, lovely indeed—a little pale, perhaps. Maurice,’ leaning across and whispering cautiously, ‘ why don’t you try to make a reconciliation of some sort? A beginning might lead to the happiest results, and I am sure you do care for her—and—*do* try and make up with her.’

‘ You must be out of your mind!’ says Maurice, springing to his feet, and to poor

Margaret's abject fear speaking at the top of his lungs. 'With *her*, when she deliberately deserted me of her own accord —when—'

'Oh, hush, hush!' says Margaret in an agony. She makes wild signs to him, pointing towards the closed doors as she does so. A nice girl, we all know, would rather *die* than put her ear to a keyhole, even if by doing so she could save her neck from the scaffold; but the very best of girls might by chance be leaning against a door through the chinks of which sounds might enter from the room beyond it. 'She'll *hear* you!' gasps Margaret.

'I don't care if she does,' says Maurice indignantly, but he calms down for all that, and consents to sit in a chair as far from the folding-doors as possible. 'You have misjudged me all through,' says he.

'I think not—I hope not. But I will say, Maurice, that I think you began your marriage badly, and — you should not have—'

‘Have what?’

‘Asked Marian to stay with you.’

‘That was’—gloomily—‘a mistake. I admit that. But have *I* nothing to complain of?’

‘Nothing, I honestly believe.’

Her tone is so honest (Margaret herself is so sweetly honest all through) that he remains silent for a moment. It is, however, a constrained silence. The knowledge that Tita is standing or sitting, laughing or frowning, behind those boards over there, disturbs him in spite of himself.

‘Well, I have often thought that, too,’ says he, ‘and yet I have often thought—the other thing. At all events, you cannot deny that *he* was in love with her.’

‘Why should I deny that? To me’—with a reproachful glance at him—‘she seems like one with whom many might be in love.’

‘Oh, you are a partisan!’ says he

irritably, rising abruptly, and preparing to pace the room.

Margaret catches his coat as he goes by her.

‘I entreat, I implore you to be quiet. It is so *slight* a partition,’ says she. ‘Do sit down like a dear boy and talk softly, unless’—wistfully and evidently hopefully—‘you want to go away.’

‘Well, I don’t,’ says he grimly.

He reseats himself. An extraordinary fascination keeps him in this room, even in face of the fact that the mistress of it is plainly longing for his departure. She has even openly hinted at it. And the fascination? It lies there behind the folding-doors. There is no romance in it, he tells himself; it is rather the feeling of an enemy who knows his foe to be close by. He turns to Margaret.

‘Why did she refuse that money?’

‘Why did you refuse hers?’

‘Pshaw! You’re evading the question. To take half of her little pittance! I

wonder you can even suggest the thing. It —it is almost an insult,' says he, reddening to his brows.

'I didn't mean it,' says Margaret quickly, the more so that she thinks he is going to walk the room again. 'Of course you could not have taken it.'

'And yet I did take her money,' says he miserably; 'I wish to heaven now I hadn't. *Then* it seemed a fair exchange —her money for my title; it is done every day, and no one thinks anything of it—but now—— It was a most cursed thing,' says he.

'It would have been nothing—nothing,' says Margaret eagerly, 'if you had been heart-whole. But to marry her, loving another, that was wrong — unpardonable——'

'Unpardonable!' He looks at her with a start. What does she mean? Is he beyond pardon, indeed? Pardon from——
'That's all over,' says he.

'It wasn't over *then*!'

'I don't know——' He gets up and walks to the window in an agitated fashion, and then back again. ' Margaret, I don't believe I ever loved her.'

Margaret stares at him.

' You are talking of Marian ?'

' Yes ; Marian. If I did love her, then there is no such thing as love—love the eternal—because I love her no longer.'

' It is not that,' says Margaret; ' but love can be killed. Poor love !' she sighed. ' Marian of her own accord has killed yours.'

There is a long pause ; then : ' Well, I'm glad of it,' says he.

He lifts his arms high above his head, as a man might who yawns, or a man might who has all at once recognised that he is rid of a great encumbrance.

' I suppose you did not come here to discuss your love affairs with Marian,' says Margaret, a little coldly.

In a strange sort of way she had liked Marian, and she knew that Marian, in a

strange sort of way, clung to *her*. And, besides, to say love could be killed! It was tantamount to saying love could die! Has *her* love died? Colonel Neilson had been with her a good deal since her return to town, and there had been moments of heart-burning, when she had searched her heart indeed, and found it wanting—wanting in its fixed determination to be true for ever to the dear dead beloved. And such a miserable wanting, a mere craving to be as others are—to live in the life of another, to know the warmth, the *breath* of the world's sunshine—to love, and be loved again.

No wonder Margaret is angry with Rylton for bringing all these delinquencies into the light of certainty.

'No,' says Sir Maurice moodily. 'I came here to see you.'

'You told me you intended leaving town yesterday.'

'Yes, I know. I meant it. But I've changed my mind about stopping in the

country—at least, I'm running down to The Place for the night to see after some business with the agent, but I'll be back to-morrow.'

'Really, you must forgive me if I say I don't think much of your mind,' says Margaret, who is still a little sore over her own reflections.

'I don't think much of it myself,' says Rylton, with increasing gloom.

At this abject surrender Margaret's tender heart relents.

'I believe all you have told me,' says she; 'and I suppose I'm glad of it, although—— Well, never mind that. Marian deserves no pity, but still——'

'Pshaw!' says he. 'What has Marian got to do with it? Marian never cared *that* about me.' He makes an expressive movement with his fingers—a little snap. 'I know now that Marian only played with me. I amused her. I was the play-thing of an hour.'

'You wrong her there, Maurice.'

'Do I? How? They tell us'—with a bitter smile—'that if a woman loves a man she will cling to him through all things—poverty, ill-repute, even crime. But poverty, the least of these things, daunted *her*.'

'She had known so *much* poverty——'

'Are you pleading *her* cause now?' says Maurice, with a slight smile. 'You plead it badly. The very fact of her knowing it so well should not have deterred her from trying it again with the man she loved. I offered to throw up everything for her, to go abroad, to work, to wrestle with fortune for her sake, but she——' He stops, and draws a long breath. 'Well, it is over,' says he.

'That is. But your future life——'

'I'm not a favourite of the gods, am I?' says he, laughing. 'My future life! Well, I leave it to them. So Tita is looking well?'

'Yes; quite well. A little pale, I said.'

'She never had much colour. She never speaks of me, I suppose?'

'Sometimes--yes.'

Rylton looks down at the carpet, and then laughs a little awkwardly.

'I expect I had better not inquire into it,' says he. 'It is a general remark, yet it is *all* question.'

'Of course, she remembers things,' says Margaret nervously.

If he were to make another scene, to prance up and down the room, and talk at the top of his lungs, there is no knowing what may not happen, considering who is standing behind those folding-doors.

'We can all remember things,' says Sir Maurice, rising and holding out his hand. He bids her good-bye. As he gets to the door he looks back. 'Tell her I didn't like to keep her in durance vile longer than was necessary,' says he.

With this parting shot, he goes down the stairs and out of the house.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

HOW MARGARET MAKES A FEARFUL DISCOVERY ; HOW SHE RUSHES TO THE RESCUE, BUT IS FAR FROM WELL RECEIVED ; AND HOW TITA GIVES HERSELF AWAY, NOT ONCE, BUT TWICE.

MARGARET, with a keen sense of relief, goes to the folding-doors, opens them cautiously, and looks in. A distinctly cold and cutting air greets her ; she is aware at once that she is standing in a thorough draught. And where is Tita ?

Good gracious ! where *can* she have gone to ? There is no exit from this room save through the next, where she and Rylton have been sitting—except by

the chimney, or through one of the windows. For one awful moment it occurs to Miss Knollys that Tita might have flung herself out of a window.

She glances hurriedly to the window nearest her, and then sees something that makes her heart stand still.

Are those Tita's heels ?

Margaret's mind is full of suicidal fears. She steps cautiously towards the open window—the window through which Tita's body is now flung. Tita's feet alone are in the room ! Tita herself is suspended between heaven and earth, like Mahomet's coffin !

'Tita ! what are you doing ?' cries Margaret, laying a sudden hand upon the white sash that is encircling Lady Rylton's waist.

At this, the latter scrambles back into a more respectable position, and stares at Margaret with angry, shamed eyes, and cheeks like a 'red, red rose.'

'Good gracious !' says she. 'Why, you very nearly threw me out of the window.'

Now, this is so manifestly unfair that Margaret feels resentment. What had her action been? She had dragged Tita backwards into the room; she had not pushed her out, as the latter seemed to suggest.

'I quite thought you were trying to throw yourself out of the window,' says Margaret, with emphasis. 'What *have* you been doing?'

'Nothing—nothing,' declares Tita airily, hurriedly. 'The day is so lovely—you remember we were talking about it a while ago. I was—er—listening to the birds.'

'Surely one need not hang one's self out of a window to listen to them,' says Miss Knollys. 'Why don't you confess the truth? You were looking at Maurice.'

'Well, if you *will* have it,' says Tita resentfully, 'I *was*! I was curious to see if he was as ill-tempered-looking as ever. I was foiled, however; I saw nothing but the back of his odious head.'

'What a disappointment!' says Mar-

garet, laughing with an irrepressible if rather unkind mirth.

'I dare say I shall get over it,' coldly, with a distrustful glance at Margaret.

'Well—how *is* he looking ?'

At this Margaret laughs again.

'That was just what he asked about you !'

'About me !' frowning. 'Fancy his asking anything about me ! Well, and you said I was looking——'

'Lovely, but a little pale, as if you were pining.'

'Margaret, you did *not* say that !'

'My dear child, of course I did. I am not sure about the pining, but I certainly said you looked pale. So you do. You couldn't expect me to tell a lie about it.'

'I could indeed. I,' with deep reproach, 'would have told a dozen lies for you in a minute.'

'Well, I don't want you to,' says Miss Knollys. 'By-the-bye, he is not going out of town, after all.'

'No?' with studied indifference. 'Then I suppose we may expect to hear that Mrs. Bethune will be in town shortly?'

'I really do think, Tita, that you ought to refrain from speeches like that. They are unworthy of you, and they are not true. Whatever infatuation Maurice felt for Marian Bethune in the past, lies in the past. Only to-day he told me——'

'Told you?'

Tita leans eagerly forward.

'That if he ever *had* loved her—and he seemed now to doubt that—he loved her no longer.'

'Just shows how fickle he is,' says Tita, with supreme scorn.

'Of course, if you are determined to misjudge him in *every* way——'

'It is he who misjudges me!' She gets up and walks impatiently from Margaret to the window and back again. 'How could he say I deliberately deserted him?'

Margaret looks at her. It suddenly occurs to her what a blessed thought that

was of hers to take him out of hearing to the far end of the room.

' You heard that, then ?'

Tita starts and turns crimson.

' Oh, that !' stammers she. ' Well, I—I couldn't help it. I was near the door, and he spoke very loudly, and——'

' And you heard,' says Margaret, suppressing some amusement. ' Quite so. Well, you did leave him, you see.'

' Not until he drove me to it by his cruelty, his wicked suspicions. You know that, Margaret.'

' Oh ! I know he behaved like a stupid boy,' says Margaret impatiently.

' Ah, *darling* Meg ! I *knew* you would take my part.'

' And you,' mercilessly, ' behaved like a silly baby.'

Tita flings herself into a chair with a petulant gesture.

' He has won you over to his side. I knew, when he took you down to the end of the room, where I could hear nothing,

that he was going to poison your mind against me.'

Miss Knollys gives way once more to ill-timed mirth.

'So you were *looking*, too?' says she.

'I—no. Oh *no*. I—I only'—growing crimson—'wanted to see whether you were safe. You had stopped talking, and I know how violent he can be, and,' with a gasp, 'I just looked once to see that you were alive.'

'Tita,' says Miss Knollys solemnly, 'when I want those dozen lies told for me in a minute, I shan't ask *you* to tell them.'

CHAPTER XLIX.

HOW MAURICE SMOKES A CIGAR, AND MUSES
ON MANY THINGS ; HOW HE LAMENTS HIS
SOLITUDE ; AND HOW AN UNEXPECTED
VISITOR COMES TO HIM.

‘ It is the mynd that maketh good or ill,’ says the old poet. Sir Maurice, sitting here in the library at The Place, feels *his* ‘mynd’ far from happy. He has finished his business with the agent, and now there lies before him a long, dull evening in which to think on many things.

He is comfortable enough. His mother is well away, somewhere in Essex, and so he has the house to himself. The fire is burning very nicely—these May evenings

are often chilly—and the cigar he is smoking is excellent. The dinner has been excellent, too. Astonishing, considering the shortness of the notice and what servants are. And yet—yet he feels dull to the last degree.

Over and over again his mind runs back to his morning's interview with Margaret. He would have stifled such returns, but they are beyond him. His brain insists on making photographs of Margaret's drawing-room, with its screens here and its pots there, and the tall jar filled with the sweet-scented flowers of early summer. The photographs go farther than that, too. One prominent object in all of them are the folding-doors at the end of the room.

It seems to him, as he angrily flicks the ash off the end of his cigar, that he had seen nothing but those folding-doors. His eyes had been riveted upon them. He—it was absurd, of course—but he had in a way seen through them—seen *her*—that

little faithless, stormy child, who is playing the very mischief with his life.

'Ask not her name ;
The light winds whisper it on every hand.'

That is the worst of it! Rylton gets up, and begins to pace the room. Her name—her face—— He cannot get rid of them. They seem to haunt him! And what has he *done* that she should so deride and scorn him? Say he was in fault about Marian Bethune. Well, he *was*—grossly in fault, if you like, so far as his having kept silence about his love for her before his marriage. But afterwards! He had little or nothing to reproach himself with afterwards. His married life had been blameless so far as Marian had been concerned. He had often wondered, indeed, about that—about that strange coldness he had felt when she had come to stay with them—with Tita and him. He had looked forward to her coming, and when she came—it was a sort of blank!

At the time he hated himself for it, but it was not to be overcome. However, it was Marian's own doing. That last time when she had refused him, he had understood her. Love with her took a second place. Money held the reins.

Up and down, up and down the room he goes, smoking and thinking.

‘She
Whom the gods love—tranquillity—’

is far from him to-night. Why had Tita run away when he went in? Margaret had told him plainly that she would not see him; she had almost allowed that she hated him, and certainly her whole conduct points that way. What is to be the end of it, then? Is he to be bound to her, and she to him, until kindly Death drops in to release them one from the other? And never a word between them all the time! It sounds ghastly! He flings his cigar into the fire, and, seating himself on the edge of the table, gives himself up a prey to evil prognostications.

His thoughts wander, but always they come back to those folding-doors, and the possible vision behind them.

Such a tender vision! Half child, half woman, wholly sweet, yet a little tyrant in her own way. The vision behind the folding-doors grows brighter. A little thing, slender, beautiful, with such bright, earnest eyes, and her lips just smiling and apart, and the soft rings of hair lying on the white forehead. Behind those doors—were the eyes glad, or angry, as they so often were—with him? With Margaret, no doubt, they were always bright. She loved Margaret, but him she never loved. Why should she? Had *he* loved her?

It is a terrible question, and all in a moment the answer to it comes to him—an answer almost as terrible. He had thought of it, trifled with it, played with it, this question. But now he *knows!* Yes, he does love her. Her, and her only.

He is still sitting at the table thinking.

His head is bent a little down, his hands are resting on the table behind him. Will she ever forgive or forget ?

‘ My love is like the sea,
As changeful and as free ;
Sometimes she’s angry, sometimes rough,
Yet oft she’s smooth and calm enough—
Ay, much too calm for me ! ’

The pretty words come to him as if describing her ; ‘ sometimes she’s angry ’ : with him she had been often angry, but now, looking back on it, what sweetest anger it had been, anger that cried aloud for tender arms in which to sink and lose itself for ever. Oh, if only—only—she would be angry with him once again, he might so argue with her that she would forgive him, and, perhaps, take him, worthless as he is, to that warm heart of hers.

Mechanically he slips from the table to a standing position. He will be in town to-morrow. He will make one last effort to see her. Margaret will aid him, and, after all, what is there to separate them ?

Hescott is in South Africa (there was nothing in that really—he had made an ass of himself over that, more or less). And Marian Bethune? Well, Tita must know by this time that that old folly is at an end for ever—even Marian herself has tired of it.

He turns slowly; the door has opened behind him. The lamp is a little low, and he has to look closely into the gloom at the end of the room to see who has come in. One of the servants, no doubt. He looks again.

'The post, Peter?' says he expectantly. But it is not Peter who comes forward.

'Maurice!' says Marian Bethune, in a tone that is barely above a whisper.

She is with him now, her hands upon his arms, her eyes riveted upon his.

CHAPTER L.

HOW RYLTON'S EVIL GENIUS COMES TO HIM
AND SPEAKS SWEET TREACHERIES WITHIN
HIS EAR ; AND HOW HE RENOUNCES HER
AND ALL HER DEEDS.

' You !' says Rylton. His voice is as low as her own, and strange—it sounds strange even to himself. Her hands are lying on his arms—the little hands he used to call snowflakes long ago. Great heaven ! *how long ago !*

He does not repulse her—that is beyond him—but in this new strange voice of his there is assuredly no welcome. He feels choking. The dead past is so horribly dead that he cannot bear to look upon it.

He feels cold—numbed. What is he to say to her, or she to him? Must this battle be fought? And through all this weary wondering there is ever present with him a strong fear.

If Tita should hear of this—if she should learn that Marian was here to-night—with him—alone! His heart sinks within him. Not all the waters of Jordan could wash him clean in her eyes.

A sudden anger against this woman rises within him. Has she not been his undoing from first to last? Gently, but with determination, he lifts her fingers from his arms.

‘Is this wise?’ says he.

‘No one can know. *No* one,’ says she hurriedly. ‘I have arranged it all. I am staying with the Heriots, and when I heard at dinner that you would be here to-night, I felt that I *should*—*must* see you.’

She flings back the soft furred cloak that is enfolding her with a little rapid movement, as though stifling. It falls in a loose

mass at her feet, and leaves her standing before him a very picture of beauty perfected. Beauty ripe, yet fresh !

All in black ! From head to foot black clothes her. In her hair jet stars are shining, round her neck jet sparkles, making more fair the sweet fair flesh beneath ; and her gown that clings around her shapely limbs as though it loves them, is black, too, and glittering with black beads.

She is looking her loveliest. Maurice takes a step towards her. Nature (as poor a thing at times as it is often grand) compels this step, then suddenly he stops. All at once, from the shadow of the room, the memory of a small, sweet, angry, frowning little face stands out.

‘ Still——’ begins he.

‘ You need not be uneasy about me,’ says Marian, in the full egotism of her nature, still believing herself as dear to him as in those old days when he was at her feet. ‘ I told them—the Heriot girl (who *would* follow me, and see to my

bad headache)—that I should go for a long walk in the park to ease the pain ; I told her not to expect me for some time. You know they let me do as I like. I ran through the park, and at the village inn I engaged a fly.'

'But the people at the inn ?'

'They could not see me. They did not know me ; and, besides, I felt I could risk all to see you.' She pauses. She lifts her beautiful face to his, and suddenly flings herself into his arms. 'Oh, Maurice ! you are free now—free ! Oh ! those *cursed* days when your mother watched and followed me. Now at last I can come to you, and you are free !'

'Free ?'

'Yes, yes.' She has raised herself again from his unwilling arms, and is gazing at him feverishly. So wild is her mood, so exalted in its own way, that she does not mark the coldness of his mien. 'What is that little fool to you ? Nothing ! A mere shadow in your path !'

'She is my wife,' says Rylton steadily.

'And *such* a wife!' Marian laughs nervously, strangely. 'Besides,' eagerly, 'that might be arranged.' She leans towards him. There is something terrible to Rylton in the expression of her eyes, the certainty that lies in them, that he is as eager to rid his life of Tita as she is. 'There are acts, words of hers that could be used. On less'—again she goes close to him and presses the fingers of one hand against his breast—'on far less evidence than we could produce *many* a divorce has been procured.'

Rylton's eyes are fixed upon her. A sense of revulsion is sickening him. How *her* eyes are shining! So might a fiend look; and her fingers—they seem to burn through his breast into his very soul.

'Acts—words—whose acts?' asks he slowly.

'Tita's.'

'Lady Rylton's? What do you mean?'

He shakes himself suddenly free of the touch that has grown hateful to him.

'I mean,' says she boldly, still unconscious of his real meaning of the abyss that lies before her, 'that you can at any moment get rid of her. You can at any moment get a divorce !'

'By lying?' says he, with agitation. 'By—vehemently—dragging her name into the dust. By falsely, grossly swearing against her.'

'Why take it so much to heart?' says she, again coming close to him. 'She would not care, she would *help* you. She could then marry her cousin. We could all see how that was. Would it be such false swearing after all?'

'Don't!' says Rylton, in a suffocating tone.

'Ah, Maurice, I understand you. I know how your honour revolts from such a step, but it is only a step—one—one, and then—we——' She covers her eyes with her hands and leans heavily against the

table behind her. ‘We should be together—*for ever*,’ whispers she faintly.

A long, long silence follows this. It seems to hold, to envelop the room. It is like darkness! All at once Marian begins to tremble. She lifts her head.

‘You do not speak,’ says she. There is something frantic in her low voice—an awful fear. The first dawn of the truth is breaking on her, but as yet the light is imperfect. ‘You do not speak,’ she repeats, and now her voice is higher, shriller; there is agony in it. ‘You mean—you mean— *What* do you mean, Maurice?’

‘What can I mean? You called me just now an honourable man.’

‘Ah, your honour!’ says she bitterly.

‘You, at least, can find no flaw in it,’ says he suddenly.

‘No? Was it an honourable man who married that girl for her money, loving me all the time? You,’ passionately, ‘you *did* love me then?’

There is question in her tone.

'The dishonour was to her, not to you,' returns he, his eyes bent on the ground.

'Oh, forget her! What has she got to do with us?' cries she, with a sudden burst of angry misery, stung by the fact that he had given no answer to that last question of hers. 'You loved me once. You loved me. Oh, Maurice, smiting her hands together, 'you cannot have forgotten that! You cannot. Why should *I* remember if you forget? Each kiss of yours, each word, is graven on my soul! When I am dead, perhaps I shall forget, but not till then; and you—you, too—you must remember!'

'I remember!'

He is looking white and haggard.

'Ah!'

There is a quick triumphant note in her voice.

'But what?' he goes on quickly. 'What have I to remember about you? That I prayed you on my knees day after day to give yourself to me. To risk the chances

of poverty, to marry me—and,’ slowly, ‘ I remember, too, your answer. It was always “*No.*” You loved me, you said, but you would wait. Poverty frightened you. I would have given my life for you, you would not give even your comfort for me. Even when my engagement with—
with—’

‘ *Your wife!*’

The words come like a knife from between her clenched teeth.

‘ With Tita was almost accomplished—but not quite—I spoke to you again, but you still held back. You let me go—you deliberately gave me up to another. Was that love? I tell you,’ says he vehemently, ‘ that all the money the world contains would not have forced me from you at that time. You of your own accord put me outside your life. Was that love?’

‘ I was content to wait. I did not seek another in marriage. I, too, was poor. But I swore to myself to live and die a pauper—for your sake, if—if no help came

to us.' She pauses. A sigh—a cruel sigh bursts from her lips. 'No help came.'

She is deadly white. A sudden reaction from hope, sure and glorious, to horrible despair is mastering her. She had not thought, she had not known she loved him so well until now, when it has begun to dawn upon her that he no longer loves her.

In all her life no gladness had come to her until she met Rylton, and then her heart went forth, but without the full generosity of one who had been fed with love from its birth. Soured, narrowed by her surroundings, and chilled by a dread of the poverty she had so learned to fear, she had hung back when joy was offered to her, and now that joy was dead. It would be hers never, never! The love on which she had been counting all these days,

'For which I cry both day and night,
For which I let slip all delight,
Whereby I grow both deaf and blind,
Careless to win, unskilled to find,'

is hers no longer. Deaf and blind she has been indeed.

A little faintness falls on her ; she sways, and Rylton, catching her, presses her into a chair. His touch recalls her to life, and rouses within her a sudden outbreak of passion.

' Maurice !'—she holds him with both her hands—' I will *not* believe it. It is not true ! You love me still ! You do, you do. I was'—she lets his arms go and raises her hands to his shoulders, and, leaning back, gazes with wild, beautiful, beseeching eyes into his face—' wrong—foolish—*mad*, I think, when I flung from me the only good that Heaven ever gave me, but—but for all that you love me still.' She pauses. His eyes are on the ground ; he looks like a criminal condemned to death. ' Say it, *say* it,' whispers she hoarsely. There is a silence that speaks. He can feel the shudder that runs through her. It nerves him.

' All this,' he says—his voice is low and

harsh, because of the agony of the moment
—‘all this comes——’

He grows silent. He cannot say it.
She can.

‘*Too late?*’

The words fall like a knell, yet there is a question in them, and one that must be answered.

‘*Too late!*’ repeats he. He could have cursed himself, yet it had to be done. He frees himself from her and stands back. ‘Why do you compel me to say such things?’ cries he violently.

But she does not hear him. She is looking into the distant corner of the room as though—as one might suppose, seeing her earnest gaze—she can there see something. Her dead life’s hope, perhaps, lying in its shroud. And perhaps, too, the sight is too much for her, for after a moment or two she raises her hands to her eyes, and clasps them there.

A sound breaks from her. In all his after life Rylton never forgets it.

'Oh!' says she, and that is all—but it sounds like a last breath—a final moan—an end.

Then all at once it is over. Whatever she has felt is done with for the present. She takes down her hands, and looks round at him deliberately. Her face is as the face of one dead, but her voice is clear and cold and cutting as an east wind.

'It is this, then,' says she, 'that all is at an end between us. You have tired of me. I have heard that men do tire. Now I know it. You wish me dead, perhaps.'

'No! Marian, no!'

'For that, I suppose, I should thank you. Thank the man who once wanted so much to make me his wife. You *did* wish to make me—your wife?'

'Yes—yes. But that is all over,' says he desperately.

'For you, yes! For me——'

She pauses.

'Great heavens!' cries Rylton. 'Why go on like this? Why go into it again?

Was it my fault? At that time I was a poor man. I laid my heart at your feet, but'—drawing a long breath—‘I *was* a poor man. It all lay in that.’

‘Ah! You will throw that in my teeth always,’ says she—not violently now, not even with a touch of excitement, but slowly, evenly. ‘Even in the days to come. Yet it was not that that killed your love for me. There was something else. Go on. Let me hear it.’

‘There is nothing to hear. I beg of you, Marian, to——’

‘To let you off?’ says she, with a ghastly attempt at gaiety. ‘No, don’t hope for that. There is something—something that has cost *me*—everything. And I will learn it. No one’s love dies without a cause. And there is a cause for the death of yours. Be frank with me, now, in this our last hour. Make me a confession.’

Five minutes ago she would have thrown her arms round him, and besought him, with tender phrases, to tell her what is on

his mind. Now she stands apart from him, with a cold, lifeless smile upon her still colder lips.

'No! Do not perjure yourself,' says she quickly, seeing him about to speak. 'Do you think I do not know? That I cannot see by your face that there is something? I have studied it quite long enough to understand it. Come, Maurice. The past is past—*you* have decided that—and it is a merely curious mood that leads me to ask you the secret of the great crime that has separated us. *My* crime, *bien entendu* !'

Rylton turns away from her with an impatient gesture, and goes back to the hearthrug. To persist like this! It is madness!

'There was no crime,' says he. 'But'—frowning—'as we are on the subject, and as you compel me to it, I——'

'No, don't speak. *Don't!*' says she quickly.

She seems to cower away from him.

She had solicited his condemnation, yet when it came to the point she had no strength to bear it. And after all, if she had only known, he was merely going to accuse himself of having been over-foolish when he induced Tita to ask her to Oak-dean on a visit.

‘As you will,’ says he listlessly. ‘I was merely thinking of——’

‘I know—I know. Of course *she* would make me out the worst in the world, and I have reason to know that her cousin, Miss Hescott, told you stories about me. There was a night when——’

‘When——’

‘Ah, I was wrong there. I was merely thinking of——’

‘Wrong!’ says Rylton slowly.

His thoughts have gone back to that last interview with Margaret, and what she had said about his folly in asking Marian on a visit to Oak-dean, considering all that had been said and done between them in the old time.

'You remember it, then?' says Marian. She looks at him. Her face is still livid, and as she speaks she throws back her head and laughs aloud—such a cruel, hateful laugh! 'Well, I know it—I lied. I lied then most abominably.'

'Then?'

'That night on the balcony—I confess it. I know Minnie Hescott told you.'

Rylton's mind goes quickly back.

'That night,' says he slowly, as if thinking, as if concentrating his thoughts, 'the night you led me to where—'

He hesitates.

'Does it hurt you to name her in my presence?' asks Mrs. Bethune in a tone like velvet. 'Well, spare yourself. Let us call her "she"—the immaculate "she." Now you can go on with safety.'

Her tone, her sneer, so evidently directed at Tita, maddens Rylton.

'You *say* you lied that night,' says he, with barely suppressed fury. 'And—I believe you. I was on the balcony with

you, and you told me then that you did not know where my wife was. At all events, you gave me the *impression* that you did not know where she was. You made me a bet—you can't have forgotten it—that she was with her cousin in the garden. I took the bet, and then you led me to the arbour—the arbour where you *knew* she was. All things seemed to swear against her—all things save her cousin, Minnie Hescott.'

‘Minnie Hescott !’ Marian Bethune laughs aloud. ‘Minnie and Tom Hescott ! Would a brother swear against a brother ? Would a sister give a brother away ? No. And I will tell you why. Because it is to the interest of each to support the other. Minnie Hescott would lie far deeper than I did to save her brother’s reputation, for with her brother’s reputation her own would sink. *I* lied when I said I did not know where your precious wife was at that moment, but I lied for *your* sake, Maurice—to save you from a woman who was

betraying you, and who would drag you down to the very dust with her.'

Rylton lifts his head.

'To what woman are you alluding?' asks he shortly, icily.

'To Tita,' returns she boldly. 'I knew where she was that night; I knew she would be with her cousin at that moment —the cousin she had known and loved all her life. The cousin she had cast aside, *for the moment*, to take your title, and mount by it to a higher rank in life.' She takes a step towards him, her large eyes blazing. 'Now you know the truth,' says she, with a vehemence that shakes her. Your love may be dead to me, but you shall know *her* as she is! Faithless! False as hell she is! *She* shall not supplant me!'

She stands back from him, her hands outstretched and clenched. She looks almost superb in her wicked wrath.

Rylton regards her steadily.

'You are tired,' says he coldly. 'You

ought to get some rest. You will sleep here to-night ?'

There is a question in his tone.

'Why not ? In this my old home—my home for years—your mother's home.'

'My mother is in Scotland,' says he briefly.

Something is tearing at his breast. Her deliberate, her most cruel attack on Tita has touched him to the quick.

'Don't be frightened !' says Mrs. Bethune, bursting out laughing. 'What are you thinking of—your reputation ?'

'No !'

Manlike, he refrains from the obvious return. But she, in her mad frenzy of despair and anger, supplies it.

'Mine, then ? It is not worth a thought, eh ? Who cares for me ? Whether I sink with the vile, or swim with the good ? No ! I'll tell you what you are thinking of, Maurice.' She lays her hand upon her throat quickly, as if stifling, yet laughs gaily. 'You are thinking that that

little *idiot* may hear of my being here, and that she will make a fuss about it—all underbred people love a fuss—and that—'

She would have gone on, but Rylton has given up his neutral position on the hearthrug—he has made one step forward, his face dark with passion.

'Not another word!' says he in a sharp, imperious tone. 'Not another word about—**MY WIFE!**'

The last two words explain all. Mrs. Bethune stands still, as if struck to the heart.

For a full minute she so stands, and then—'You are right. I should not be here,' says she. She turns, and rests her eyes steadily on him. 'So *that* is my fault,' says she, 'that you love—*her*!'

Shame holds him silent.

'You *do* love her?' persists she, playing with her misery, insisting on it. She lays her hand upon her heart as if to stay its beating. Is it going to burst its bonds?

Oh, if it only might, and at this moment! To think that she—that *girl*—should take her place! And yet, had she not known? All through, had she not known? She had felt a superstitious fear about her, and now—‘ You do not speak?’ says she. ‘ Is it that you cannot? God knows I do not wonder! Well,’ slowly, ‘ good - night! good-bye !’

She goes to the door.

‘ You cannot go like this,’ says Rylton, with some agitation. ‘ Stay here to-night. I shall have time to catch the up-train, and I have business in town ; and besides——’

‘ Do not lie !’ says she. She stops and faces him ; her eyes are aflame, and she throws out her right arm with a gesture that must be called magnificent. It fills him with a sort of admiration. ‘ I want no hollow courtesies from you.’ She stoops, and gathering up her wraps, folds them around her. Then she turns to him again. ‘ As all is dead between us.’ She stops short. ‘ Oh no !’—laying

her hand upon her heart.—‘As all is dead in *you*—’

Whether her strength forsakes her here, or whether she refuses to say more, he never knows. She opens the door and goes into the hall, and, seeing a servant, beckons to him.

Rylton follows her, but, seeing him coming, she turns and waves him back. One last word she flings at him.

‘Remember your reputation.’

He can hear the bitterness of her laugh as she runs down the stone steps into the fly outside. She had evidently told the man to wait.

CHAPTER LI.

HOW TITA PLEADS HER CAUSE WITH MARGARET ; AND HOW MARGARET REBUKES HER ; AND HOW STEPS ARE HEARD, AND TITA SEEKS SECLUSION BEHIND A JAPANESE SCREEN ; AND WHAT COMES OF IT.

‘WHAT hour did he say he was coming?’ asks Tita, looking up suddenly from the book she has been pretending to read.

‘About four. I wish, dearest, you would consent to see him.’

‘I consent? Four, you say? And it is just three now. A whole hour before I feel his hated presence in the house. Where are you going to receive him?’

‘In the small drawing-room, I suppose.’

' You *suppose*. Margaret, is it possible you have not given directions to James? Why, he might show him in *here*.'

' Well, even if he did,' says Margaret impatiently, ' I don't suppose he would do you any bodily harm. Once you saw him the ice would be broken, and——'

' We should both fall in and be drowned. It would only make matters worse, I assure you.'

' It would be a change at all events, and "variety is charming." As it is, you have both fallen out.'

' You are getting too funny for anything,' says Tita, tilting her chin saucily.

' Now if you were to do as you suggest, fall in—in *love*—with each other——'

' Really, Margaret, this is beneath you,' says Tita, laughing in spite of herself. ' No! no! no! I tell you,' starting to her feet, ' I'd rather *die* than meet him again. When you and Colonel Neilson are married——'

' Oh! as to *that*,' says Margaret, but she colours faintly.

'I shall take a tiny cottage in the country, and a tiny maid; and I'll have chickens, and a big dog, and a pony and trap, and——'

'A desolate hearth. No, Tita, you were not born for the old maid's joys.'

'Well, I was not born to be tyrannized over, any way,' says Tita, raising her arms above her head, her fingers interlaced, and yawning lightly. 'An old maid has liberty, at all events.'

'I don't see that mine does me much good,' says Margaret ruefully.

'That's why you are going to give it up. Though anyone who could call *you* an old maid would be a fool. I sometimes—wistfully—'wish you *were* going to be one, Meg, because then I could live with you for ever.'

'Well, you shall.'

'No; not I. Three is trumpery.'

'There won't be three.'

'I wish I had a big bet on that. I wish someone would bet me my old dear home,

my Oakdean, upon that. I should be a happy girl again.'

A great sadness grows within her eyes.

'Tita, you could be happy if you chose.'

'You are always saying that,' says Lady Rylton, looking full at her. 'But how—*how* can I be happy?'

'See Maurice! Make it up with him. Put an end to this foolish quarrel.'

'What should I gain by agreeing to live again with a man who cares nothing for me? I tell you, Margaret, that I desire no great things. I did not expect to wring from life extraordinary joys. I have never been exorbitant in my demands. I did not even ask that Maurice should *love* me. I asked only that he should *like* me—be—be *fond* of me. I'—her voice beginning to tremble—'have had *so* few people to be fond of me; and to *live* with anyone, Margaret, to see him all day long, and know he cared nothing for me, that he thought me in his way, that he so hated me that he couldn't speak to me without

scolding me, or saying hurtful words ! Oh no ! I could not do that again.'

' Maurice has been most unfortunate,' says Margaret, very sadly. ' Do you really believe all this of him, Tita ?'

' I believe he loved Mrs. Bethune all the time,' returns she simply. ' And even if it be true what you say, that he does not love her now—still he does not love me either.'

' And you ?'

' Oh, I—I am like "the miller of the Dee." ' She had been on the verge of tears, but now she laughs.

' "I care for nobody, no, not I,
And nobody cares for me."

I told you that before. Why do you persist in thinking I am in love ? Such a silly phrase ! At all events'—disdainfully—' I'm not in love with Maurice.'

' I am afraid not, indeed,' says Margaret, in a low voice. ' And yet you seem to have such a capacity for loving. Me I know you love—and that old home.'

'Ah yes—that! But that is gone. And soon you will be gone, too.'

'Never! never!' says Margaret earnestly. 'And all this is so morbid, Tita. You must rouse yourself; you know some of our old friends are coming to see me on Sunday next. You will meet them?'

'If you like.' She pauses. 'Is Mrs. Chichester coming?'

'Yes, I think so, and Randal Gower, and some others.'

'I should like to see them very much.'

She has grown quite animated.

'The only one you *don't* want to see, in my opinion, is your husband,' says Margaret, with a little reproach.

'I want to see him quite as much as he wants to see me,' says Tita. 'By-the-bye, you ought to tell James about his coming. It is half-past three now.'

'He's always late,' says Margaret lazily.

But even as she says it, both Tita and she are conscious of the approach of a

man's footstep, that assuredly is not the footstep of James.

'I told you—I told you!' cries Tita, springing to her feet, and wringing her hands. 'Oh! *why* didn't you give some directions to James? Oh, Margaret! Oh! *what* shall I do? If I go out there I shall meet him face to face. Oh! why do people build rooms with only one door in them? I'm undone.' She glances wildly round her, and in the far distance of this big drawing-room espies a screen. 'That,' gasps she, '*that* will do! I'll hide myself behind that. Don't keep him long, Meg darling! Hurry him off. Say you've got the cholera—*any* little thing like that—and get rid of him.'

'Tita—you can't. It is impossible. He will probably say things, and you won't like them—and—'

'I shan't listen! I shall put my fingers in my ears. Of course'—indignantly—'I shan't listen.'

'But—Tita—good gracious——'

Her other words are lost for ever. The handle of the door is turned. Tita, indeed, has barely time to scramble behind the screen when Sir Maurice is announced by James, who is electrified by the glance his mistress casts at him.

'I expect I'm a little early,' says Rylton, shaking hands with Margaret—apologizing in his words but not in his tone. He is of course unaware of the heart-burnings in Margaret's breast, or the apology would have been more than a mere society speech. 'You are alone?'

Here poor Margaret's purgatory begins—Margaret, who is the soul of truth.

'Well, you can see!' says she, spreading out her hands and giving a comprehensive glance round her—a glance that rests as if stricken on the screen. What awful possibilities lie behind that!

'Yes, yes, of course. Yet I fancied I heard voices.'

'How curious are our fancies!' says poor Margaret, taking the tone of an advanced

Theosophist, even while her heart is dying within her.

‘Where is Tita?’ asks Rylton suddenly. To Margaret’s guilty conscience the direct question sounds like an open disbelief in her former answers. But Rylton had asked it thus abruptly merely because he felt that if he lingered over it it never might be asked; and he *must* know. ‘Where is Tita?’ asks he again. Where indeed!

‘She is here—at least,’ hurriedly, almost frantically, ‘*with me*, you know; staying with me. *Staying*, you know.’

‘Yes, I know. Gone out, perhaps?’

‘No, n—o. In retirement,’ says Margaret wretchedly. *Is* she listening? How can she answer him all through? If he speaks *against* her, what is she to do? If she has in all justice to condemn her in some little ways, will she bear it? Will she keep her fingers in her ears?

‘Ah—headache, I suppose,’ says Rylton.

‘Yes; her head aches sometimes,’ says

Margaret, who now feels she is fast developing into a confirmed liar.

‘It usen’t to ache,’ says he.

At this Miss Knollys grows a little wild.

‘Used it not?’ says she. ‘You remember, perhaps; I don’t! But I’m certain she would object to being made a subject for cross-examination. If you are anxious about her health, you need not be. She is well, very well indeed. Excellently well. She seems to regret—to require—nothing.’

Margaret has quite assured herself that this little speech of hers will be acceptable to the hidden form behind the screen. She feels, indeed, quite proud of it. Tita had been angry with her that last day when she had told Rylton she looked pale, but now she casts a glance at the screen, and to her horror sees that it shakes perceptibly. There is something angry in the shake of it. What is wrong now? What has she said or done?

'I am glad to hear that,' says Sir Maurice, in a tone that is absolutely raging. He moves up the room, as he speaks, to the fire—a small fire, it is still a little chilly—and terribly close to the screen. Indeed, as he stoops to lift the poker and break the coals, his elbow touches the corner of it.

'Don't stand there; come over here. So bad for your complexion!' says Margaret frantically.

As Maurice is about as brown as he can be, this caution falls somewhat flat.

'It's cold enough,' says he absently, standing upright, with his hands behind him. He gives himself a little shake, as men do when airing themselves before a fire in mid-winter. It is quite warm to-day, but he had 'seen the fire,' and—we are all children of habit. 'It is wonderfully cold for this time of year,' continues he, even more absently than before. He lays his hand upon the corner of the screen near him. Margaret is conscious

of a vague sensation of faintness. Maurice turns to her.

‘ You were saying that Tita——’

Here Margaret rebels.

‘ Once for all, Maurice, I decline to discuss your wife,’ says she quickly. ‘ Talk of anything else on earth you like—of Mr. Gladstone, the Irish question, poor Lord Tennyson, the mice in Hungary, *anything*—but *not* of Tita !’

‘ But why?’ asks Rylton. ‘ Has she forbidden you to mention her to me ?’

‘ Certainly not ! Why should she ?’

‘ Why indeed ? A man more barbarously treated by her than I have been—has seldom——’

Margaret’s unhappy eyes once more glance towards the screen. It is shaking now—ominously.

‘ Of course ! Of course ! We all know that,’ says she, her eyes on the screen, her mind nowhere. She has not the least idea of the words she has chosen. She had meant only to pacify him, to avert the

catastrophe if possible : she had spoken timidly, enthusiastically, *fatally*. The screen now seems to quiver to its fall. An earthquake has taken possession of it, apparently—an earthquake in an extremely advanced stage.

Oh, those girls, and their promises about their fingers and their ears !

'I'm sorry I can't ask you to stay, Maurice,' says she hurriedly. 'But—but I'm not well : I, too, have a headache—a sort of neuralgia, you know.'

'You seem pretty well, however,' says Sir Maurice, regarding her curiously.

'Oh, I dare say,' impatiently. 'But I'm not. I'm ill. I tell you this sudden attack of influenza is overpowering me, and—it's *infectious*, my dear Maurice. It is really. They all say so—the very cleverest doctors ; and I should never forgive myself if you took it—and, besides——'

'You can't be feeling very bad,' says Maurice slowly. 'Your colour is all right.'

'Ah! That is what is so deceptive about it,' says Margaret eagerly. 'One looks well, even whilst one is almost dying. I assure you these sudden attacks of—of toothache'—wildly—'are most trying. They take so much out of one.'

'They must,' says Maurice gravely. 'So many attacks, and all endured at the same time, would shake the constitution of an annuitant. Headache, neuralgia, influenza, toothache! You have been greatly afflicted. Are you sure you feel no symptoms of hydrophobia?'

'Maurice——'

'No? So glad of that! My dear girl, why are you so anxious to get rid of me?'

'Anxious to get rid of you? What an absurd idea!'

'Well, if not that, what on earth *do* you mean?'

'I have told you! I have a headache.'

'Like Lady Rylton. The fact is, Margaret,' says he, turning upon her

wrathfully, ‘she has bound you down not to listen to a word I can say in my own defence. The last day I was here you were very different. But I can see she has been at work since, and is fast prejudicing you against me. I call that most unfair. I don’t blame *you*, though I think you *might* give half an hour to a cousin and an old friend—one who was your friend long before ever *she* saw you. You think the right is all on her side; but is it? Now I put it fairly to you. *Is it?*’

Margaret is quaking.

‘My dear Maurice—I—you know how I feel for you—for’—with a frantic glance at the screen—‘for *both* of you, but—’

‘Pshaw! that is mere playing with the subject. Do you mean to say you have given up even your honest opinion to her? You must know that it is not right for a wife to refuse to live with her husband. Come’—vehemently—‘you *must* know that.’

‘Yes. Yes, of course,’ says poor Mar-

garet, who doesn't know on earth what she is saying.

Her eyes are riveted on that awful screen, and now she is shaken to the very core by the fact that it *is* evidently undergoing a second earthquake! What is to be done? How long will this last? And when the end comes, will even *one* of them be left alive to tell the tale?

'Look here!' says Rylton. 'She won't see me, it appears; she declines to acknowledge the tie that binds us. She has plainly decided on putting me outside her life altogether. But she can't do that, you know. And'—with some vehemence—'what I wish to say is this, that if I was in fault when I married her, fancying myself in love with another woman——'

'Maurice, I entreat,' says Margaret, rising, 'I *desire* you to——'

'No; you must listen. I will not be condemned unheard. She can't have it all her own way. If I was in fault, so was she. Is it right for a woman to marry a

man without one spark of love for him, with—she never concealed it—an almost open dislike to him ?'

'Dislike? Maurice——'

'Well, is she not proving it now? My coming seems to be the signal for her hiding herself away in her own room. "In retirement" you said she was, with a bad headache. Do you think'—furiously—'I can't see through her headaches? Now listen, Margaret; the case stands thus: I married her for her money, and she married me for my title. We both accepted the risk, and——'

Margaret throws up her hands. Her face grows livid, her eyes are fastened on the screen, and at this moment it goes over with a loud crash.

'It is not true! It is a lie!' says Tita, advancing into the middle of the room, her lips apart, her eyes blazing.

CHAPTER LII.

HOW TITA WAGES WAR WITH MARGARET AND MAURICE ; AND HOW MARGARET SUFFERS IGNOMINIOUS TREATMENT ON BOTH HANDS ; AND HOW MAURICE AT THE LAST GAINS ONE SMALL VICTORY.

THERE is a moment's awful silence, and then Tita sweeps straight up to Rylton, who is gazing at her as if he never saw her before. As for Margaret, she feels as if she is going to faint.

‘I—I !’ says Tita ; ‘to accuse me of marrying you for your title ! I never thought about your title. I don’t care a fig for your title. My greatest grief now is that people call me Lady Rylton.’

'I beg of you, Tita——' begins Margaret, trembling; she lays her hand on the girl's arm, but Tita shakes her off.

'Don't speak to me. Don't touch me. You are as bad as he is. You took his part all through. You said you *felt* for him! When he was saying all sorts of dreadful things about me. You said, "Yes, yes, of course." I heard you; I was listening. I heard every word.'

'May I ask,' says Rylton, 'if you did not marry me for my title, what *did* you marry me for? Not,' with a sneer, 'for love, certainly.'

'I should think not,' with a sneer on her part that sinks his into insignificance. 'I married you to escape from my uncle, who was making me wretched! But not' —with an ireful glance at him—'*half* as wretched as *you* have made me!'

Rylton shrugs his shoulders. You should never shrug your shoulders when a woman is angry.

'Yes, wretched—wretched!' says Tita,

angry tears flooding her eyes. ‘There was never *any* one so miserable as I have been since I married you.’

‘That makes it all the more unfortunate that you are married to me still,’ says Rylton icily.

‘I may be married to you—I shan’t live with you,’ says Tita.

‘We shall see to that,’ says Rylton, who has lost his head a little.

‘Yes, *I* shall,’ returns she, with open defiance.

Meantime Margaret, who had been crushed by that first onslaught on her, has recovered herself a little. To appeal to Tita again is useless; but to Maurice—she *must* say a word of entreaty to Maurice. Tita has been most unjust, but men are of nobler make. Maurice will understand.’

‘I think,’ says she very gently, catching his eye, ‘that it would be better for you to—to discuss all this—with Tita—alone. I shall go, but I beg of you, Maurice, to——’

'Pray don't beg anything of me,' says Maurice, turning upon her with an expression that bodes no good to anyone. 'I should think you ought to be the last person in the world to ask a favour of me.'

'Good gracious! what have I done now?' exclaims Margaret, shrinking back, and cut to the heart by this fresh affront.

'You knew she was there, behind that screen, and you never gave me even a hint about it. A hint would have been sufficient, but—'

'I did!' says Margaret, driven to bay. 'I told you I had a toothache, and that you were to go away—but you wouldn't!'

'You told me you had twenty diseases, but even that wouldn't exonerate you from letting her hear what was not meant for her ears.'

'Ah! I'm glad you acknowledge even *so* much,' breaks in Tita vindictively.

'Even though they weren't meant for your ears I'm glad you heard them,' says

Rylton, turning to her with all the air of one who isn't going to give in at *any* price. 'But as for you, Margaret, I did not expect this from you. I believed you stanch, at all events, and honest; yet you deliberately let me say what was in my mind, *knowing* there was an unseen listener who would be sure to make the worst of all she heard.'

'Tita, *you* shall explain this!' says Margaret, turning with a tragic gesture towards her. 'Speak. Tell him.'

'What is the good of telling him anything?' says Tita, regarding her coldly. 'Yet though you have forsaken me, Margaret, I will do as you wish.' She turns to Rylton. 'It was against Margaret's wish that I hid behind that screen. I heard you coming, and there was no way out of the room except by the door through which you would enter, and rather than meet you I felt'—with a sudden flash of her large eyes at him—'I would willingly die. So I got behind that screen, and—

and——’ She pauses. ‘ Well, that’s all,’ says she.

‘ You see it was not my fault,’ says Margaret.

She lets a passing glance fall on Rylton, and with an increase of dignity in her air leaves the room. The two left behind look strangely at each other.

‘ So you were listening?’ says Rylton.
‘ Listening all that time?’

‘ You wrong me as usual. I was *not* listening all the time. I didn’t want to listen at all. Do you think I ever wanted to hear your voice again?’

‘ I didn’t flatter myself so far, as to this’
—bitterly—‘ and yet——’

‘ I only wanted to get away from you, and I wasn’t listening, really. I kept my fingers *tight* in my ears until you had been there for *hours*; then my arms felt as if they were dead, and I—well, I dropped them then.’

‘ Hours! I like that! Why, I haven’t been here for half an hour yet.’

'Oh, *you* could say anything!' says Tita contemptuously.

She walks away from him, and flings herself into a lounging chair. She is dressed in a very pale pink gown, with knots of black velvet here and there. And as she has seated herself a tiny, exquisitely shaped foot, clad in a pale pink stocking and black shoe, betrays itself to the admiring air.

Rylton, who is too angry to see anything, and has only a half-conscious knowledge that she is looking more beautiful than ever, goes up to the lounging chair in which she is reclining, and looking down upon her, says sternly, and with a distinctly dramatic air :

'At last we meet.'

'At last,' returns she, regarding with fixed interest the tip of her shoe as she sways it with an air of steady indifference to and fro. 'Against my will!'

'I know that. I have had plenty of time to know that.'

‘Then why do you come?’

‘To see you,’ says he plainly.

‘Knowing that I didn’t wish to see
you?’

‘Yes. Because I wish to see you.’

‘What a man’s reason?’ says she, with a scoffing smile. ‘I wonder you aren’t ashamed of yourself.’

‘Well, I *am* sometimes,’ says Rylton, making an effort to suppress the anger that is rising within him. ‘I sometimes tell myself, for example, that I must be the meanest hound alive. I know you avoid me—hate me—and yet I come.’

‘But why—why?’ impatiently.

‘Because,’ slowly, ‘I—do not hate *you*.’

‘Don’t be a hypocrite,’ says Tita sharply. She gets up suddenly, pushing back her chair behind her. ‘*Why* do you pretend?’ says she. ‘What is to be gained by it? I know we are bound to each other in a sense—bound——’ She breaks off. ‘Ah, that horrid word!’ cries she. ‘Why can we not get rid of it? Why can’t we

separate? How ridiculous the laws are! You would be as glad to say good-bye to me for ever as I should be to say it to you, and yet——'

'I beg your pardon,' says Rylton, interrupting her quickly. 'Speak for yourself only. For my part, I have no desire to be separated from you now, or,' steadily, 'at any other time.'

Tita lifts her eyes and looks at him. Their glances meet, and there is something in his that brings the blood to her face.

'I cannot understand you,' cries she, with some agitation. 'You don't want my money *now*; you have plenty of your own, and,' throwing up her head with a disdainful little gesture, 'certainly you don't want *me*.'

'You seem wonderfully certain on many points,' says Rylton, 'but is your judgment always infallible?'

'In this case, yes.'

'Ah! you have decided,' says he. His

gaze wanders from her face and falls upon her hands. On the right hand is a beautiful pearl ring. He regards it without thought for a second or two, and then he wakens to the fact that he had never seen it there before. ‘Who gave you that ring?’ demands he suddenly, with something of the old masterful air. It is so like the old air that Tita for a little while is silent, then she wakes. No! It is all over now—that ownership. She has emancipated herself; she is free. There is something strange and terrible, however, to her in the knowledge that this thought gives her no joy. She stands pale, actually frightened, for there *is* fear in the knowledge—that she had felt a sharp throb of delight when that commanding tone had fallen on her ears.

She recovers almost instantly.

‘You think it was Tom, perhaps,’ says she, speaking with a little difficulty, but smiling contemptuously. ‘Well, it was not. It was only Margaret, after all.

This is a last insult, I suppose. Was it to deliver it that you came here to-day ?'

'No,' he is beginning, 'but—'

'*You* ask me questions,' continues she, brushing his words aside with a wave of her small hand. 'And I—I—have *I* no questions to ask ?' She stops, as if suffocating.

'You have, God knows,' says he. 'And'—he hesitates—'I don't expect you to believe me, but—that old folly—it is dead.'

'Dead ?' She shakes her head. 'What killed it ?'

'*You* !' says Rylton.

One burning glance she casts at him.

'Do not let us waste time,' says she. 'Tell me plainly why you came here, why you want to see me.'

'You give me little encouragement to speak'—bitterly. 'But it is this : I want you to come back to me, to be mistress of my house again. I'—he pauses as if seeking words—'I have bought a new

house ; I want you to come and be the head of it.'

Tita has been listening to him with wide eyes. She had grown pale as death itself during his speech, and now she recoils from him. She makes a little movement as though to repel him for ever, and then, suddenly she covers her eyes with her hands, and bursts into violent weeping.

'Oh no ! No !' gasps she. 'Never ! Never again ! How *could* you ask me !'

He takes a step towards her, and lays his hand upon her arm.

'No, don't touch me. Don't speak to me,' cries she. 'I have *had* to see you to-day, and it has been terrible to me—so terrible that I hope I shall *never* see you again. I could not bear it. Go—go away !'

'Do not send me from you like this,' entreats Rylton, in a voice that trembles. Her tears cut him to the heart. He is so close to her that he has only to put out his hand to catch her—to take her to him, and

yet—— ‘Think, Tita! We have got to live out our lives, whether we like it or not. *Can* we not live them out together?’

‘We cannot,’ says Tita, in a low but distinct voice. She turns to him proudly. ‘Have you forgotten?’ says she. Her poor little face is stained with tears, but he sees no disfigurement in it; he has but one desire, and that is to take her into his arms and kiss those tears away from it for ever.

‘Forget! Do you think I shall ever forget? It is my curse that I shall always remember. But that is at an end, Tita. I *swear* it! I hope I shall never see her again. If you wish it—I——’

‘I wish nothing with regard to either her or you,’ interrupts Tita, her breath coming a little quickly. ‘It is nothing to me. I do not care.’

‘Don’t say that,’ says Rylton hoarsely. He is fighting his battle inch by inch. ‘Give me some hope! Is one sin to condemn a man for ever? I tell you all

that is done. And you—if you love no one—give *me* a chance !'

' Why should I trouble myself so far ?' says she, with infinite disdain.

At this Rylton turns away from her. He goes to the window, and stands there gazing out, but seeing nothing.

' You are implacable—cold, heartless,' says he, in a low tone, fraught with hidden meaning.

' Oh, let us leave *hearts* out of the discussion,' cries Tita scornfully. ' And, indeed, why should we have any discussions ? Why need we talk to each other at all ? This interview'—clenching her handkerchief into a ball—' what has it done for us ? It has only made us both wretched !' She takes a step nearer to him. ' Do—do promise me you will not seek another.'

' I cannot promise you that.'

' No ?' She turns back again. ' Well—go away now, at all events,' says she, sighing.

'Not until I have said what is on my mind,' says Rylton, with determination.

'Well, say it'—frowning.

'I will! You are my wife, and I am your husband, and I think it is your *duty* to live with me.'

She looks at him for a long time, as if thinking.

'I'll tell you what you think,' says she slowly, 'that it will add to your respectability in the eyes of your world to have your wife living in *your* house, and not in Margaret's.'

'I don't expect to be generously judged by you,' says he. 'But even as you put it there is sense in it. If our world——'

'Yours! yours!' interrupts she angrily—that old wound had always rankled. 'It is not my world! I have nothing to do with it. I do not belong to it. Your mother showed me that, even so long ago as when we were first'—there is a little perceptible hesitation—'married.'

'Hang my mother!' says Rylton

violently. ‘I tell you my world is your world, and if not—well, then I have no desire to belong to it. The question is, Tita, will you consent to forget—and—and forgive—and’—with a sudden plunge—‘make it up with me ?’

He would have taken her hand here, but she slips adroitly behind a small table.

‘Say it is for respectability’s sake, if you like, that I ask you to return to me,’ goes on Rylton, a little daunted, however, by her determined entrenchment; ‘though it is not. Still——’

She stops him.

‘It is no use,’ says she. ‘Don’t go on. I cannot. I *will* not. I,’ her lips quiver slightly—‘I was *too* unhappy with you. And I should always think of——’ Her voice dies away.

Rylton is thinking, too, of last night, and that terrible interview with Marian. A feeling of hatred towards her grows within him. She had played with him—killed all that was best in him, and then

flung him aside. She had let him go for the moment—only to return and spoil whatever good the world had left him. Her face rises before him pleading, seductive; and here is the other face—angry, scornful. Oh, dear little angry face! How fair, how pure, and how beloved!

'I tell you,' says he, breaking out vehemently, 'that all that is at an end—if I ever loved her.' He forgets everything now, and, catching her hands, holds them tightly in his own. 'Give me another trial,' entreats he.

'No, no!' She speaks as if choking, but for all that she draws her hands out of his. 'It would be madness. You would tire. We should tire of each other in a week—where there is no love. No, no!'

'You refuse, then?'

'I refuse!'

'Tita—'

She turns upon him passionately.

'I *won't* listen. It is useless. You'—

a sob breaks from her—‘why *don’t* you go?’ she cries a little wildly.

‘This is not good-bye,’ says he desperately. ‘You will let me come again? Margaret, I know, receives on Sundays. *Say* I may come then.’

‘Yes.’

She gives the permission faintly, and with evident reluctance. She lifts her eyes, and makes a gesture towards the door.’

‘Oh, I’m going,’ says Rylton bitterly. He goes a step or two away from her, and then pauses as if loath to leave her.

‘You might at least shake hands with me,’ says he.

She hesitates—then lays a cold little hand in his. He too hesitates, then, stooping, presses his lips warmly, lingeringly to it.

In another moment he is gone.

Tita stands motionless, listening to his departing footsteps. For a while she struggles with herself, as if determined to

overcome the strange emotion that is threatening to master her. Then she gives way, and, flinging herself into an armchair, breaks into a passion of tears.

Margaret, coming presently into the room, sees her, and going to her, kneels down beside the chair and takes her into her arms.

‘ Oh, Margaret !’ cries Tita. ‘ Oh, Meg ! Meg ! And I was so rude to you ! But to see him—to see him again—— ’

‘ My poor darling !’ says Margaret, pressing the girl to her with infinite tenderness.

CHAPTER LIII.

HOW SOME OLD FRIENDS REAPPEAR AGAIN ;
AND HOW SOME NEWS IS TOLD ; AND HOW
MAURICE MAKES ANOTHER EFFORT TO WIN
HIS CAUSE.

'Just been to see her,' says Mr. Gower, who has selected the snuggest chair in Margaret's drawing-room, and is now holding forth from its cushioned depths with a radiant smile upon his brow. 'She's staying with the Tennants. They always had a hankering after Mrs. Bethune.'

'Fancy Marian's being with *anyone* when Tessie is in town !' says Margaret. 'Captain Marryatt, that is a wretchedly uncomfortable chair. Come and sit here.'

'Oh, thanks ! I'm all right,' says Marryatt, who would have died rather than give up his present seat. It has a full command of the door. It is plain, indeed, to all present that he is expecting someone, and that someone Mrs. Chichester—his mistaken, if honest, infatuation for that lean young woman being still as ardent as of yore.

Minnie Hescott, who is talking to Tita, conceals a smile behind her fan.

'What ! haven't you heard about her and Marian ?' asks Gower, leaning towards his hostess. 'Why, you must be out of the swim altogether not to have heard that. There's a split there. A regular cucumber coldness ! They don't speak now.'

'An exaggeration, surely,' says Margaret. 'I saw Lady Rylton yesterday and—— How d'ye do, Colonel Neilson ?'

There is the faintest blush on Margaret's cheek as she rises to receive her warrior.

'I hardly expected you to-day ; I

thought you were going down to Twickenham.'

'What an awful story!' says Gower, letting her hear his whisper under pretence of picking up her handkerchief.

'Monday will do for that,' says Neilson. 'But Monday might not do for you. I decided not to risk the Sunday. By-the-bye, I have something to say to you, presently, if you can spare me a moment.'

'Certainly,' says Margaret, whereon the Colonel moves away to talk to someone else.

'Same old game, I suppose,' suggests Gower, in a sweetly confidential tone, when he has gone. 'Find it a little slow, don't you, knowing exactly what he's going to say to you, presently, when you have spared him a moment?'

'I really *don't* know,' says Margaret, bringing a dignified eye to bear upon him.

'No? Then you ought. It isn't that you haven't had opportunities enough.'

Time has not been denied you. But as you say you *don't* know, I think it my duty to prepare you ; to——'

'Really, Randal, I don't wish to know anything. I dare say Colonel Neilson is quite capable of——'

'He appears to me,' severely, 'to be thoroughly *in*-capable. He ought to have impressed it upon your brain in half the time he's taken to do it. It is quite a *little* speech, and only firmness was required to make you remember it. This is it——'

'I don't wish to hear anything,' says Margaret with suspicious haste.

'But *I* wish you to hear it. I think it bad to have things sprung upon one unawares. Now listen. "For the nine hundred and ninetieth time, my beloved Margaret, I implore you on my bended knees to make me a happy man ! You remember it now ?"

'No, indeed ; I never heard such an absurd speech in my life.'

'That's the *second* story you've told to-day,' says Mr. Gower, regarding her with gentle sorrow.

'Oh, don't be stupid!' says Margaret. 'Tell me what I *want* to know; about Marian. I am sorry if there really has occurred a breach between her and my aunt.'

'There is little doubt about that! What a born orator is a woman!' says Mr. Gower, with deep enthusiasm. 'Not *one* woman, mind you, but *every* woman. What command of language is theirs! I assure you if Mr. Gladstone had heard Mrs. Bethune on the subject of the Dowager Lady Rylton to-day, he would have given her a place in the Cabinet upon the spot. She would carry all before her in the House of Commons; we should have Home Rule for Ireland in twenty-four hours.'

'Perhaps she wouldn't have voted for it,' says Margaret, laughing.

'You bet!' says Mr. Gower. 'Any way, there's a row on between her and Lady

Rylton. The hatchet that has been buried for so long is dug up again, and it is now war to the knife between them.'

'But what is to become of Marian?' asks Margaret anxiously, whose kind heart bleeds for all sad souls.

'She's going to marry a Russian. A nobody—but lots of money. Best thing she could do, too,' says Gower, speaking the last words hurriedly, as he sees the door open and Margaret rise to receive her new visitor.

The fresh arrival is Mrs. Chichester, exquisitely arrayed in a summery costume of apple-green. It suits her eyes, which are greener than ever to-day, and sparkling. Her whole air, indeed, is full of delightful vivacity. There is a *verve*, a brightness, about her that communicates itself to her audience. She looks taller, thinner than usual.

'Such news!' cries she, in her clear, sharp voice. 'Jack is coming home next month!'

‘Jack?’ questions Margaret.

‘Yes, Jack. Jack Chichester — my husband, don’t you know?’

At this a stricken silence falls upon her listeners. They all try to look as if they had been accustomed to think of Jack Chichester as an old and bosom friend. They also try (and this is even harder) *not* to look at Marryatt. As for him, he has forgotten that there is anyone to look at him. His foolish, boyish eyes are fixed on Mrs. Chichester.

‘Yes, really,’ goes on that somewhat flighty young person. ‘No wonder you are all surprised. He has been so long away that I expect you thought he wasn’t anywhere. *I* did almost. Well, he’s coming now, any way, and that’s a blessing. You’ll all like him, I can tell you.’

There is a ring of genuine feeling in her tone, not to be mistaken. She *is* glad at the thought of her husband’s return. Marryatt, recognising that ring, sinks into

a chair with a groan. Oh, heavens ! How he has pranced after that woman for fully twelve months, dancing attendance upon her, fulfilling her commands, and all the time her heart was filled with the face of this abominable Jack !

Presently, on the first moment, indeed, when he can do so with any decency, he leaves Miss Knollys' house a sadder, and most decidedly a wiser, man !

'Am I to sympathize with you?' asks Gower, in a low, expressive voice, as Mrs. Chichester sweeps towards him.

She laughs.

'Pouf!' says she, making light of his little impertinence. 'You're out of it altogether. Why, I'm *glad* he's coming home. You've mistaken me.'

'I knew it. I felt it all along,' cries Gower enthusiastically. 'It is *you* who have mistaken me. When I mentioned the word "sympathy"—ah ! rapturously, 'that was sympathy with your joy !'

'Was it? You ought to do it again,

says Mrs. Chichester ; ‘and before the glass next time. *Practise* it. However, I’m too happy to give you the lesson you deserve. I can tell you Jack isn’t half bad. I like him better, any way, than any man I ever met in my life, and that’s saying a lot. Of course,’ candidly, ‘I doubt if I could ever like any man as well as myself ; but I confess I run it very close with Jack.’

‘Naturally. “We all love Jack,”’ quotes Mr. Gower in a sort of ecstasy.

‘But for all that, I must have my little fling sometimes,’ says Jack’s wife, with a delightful smile, that makes her look thinner than ever.

‘Quite so,’ says Gower.

They both laugh—a good healthy laugh ; and, indeed, the vulgar expression coming from her does not sound so bad as it might. There are some people who, when they say a queer thing, set one’s teeth on edge ; and there are others who, when they use the same words, raise only

a smile. As yet, there is much injustice in the world.

Margaret is standing in a distant window, talking in an undertone to Colonel Neilson, and Gower is now teasing Minnie Hescott, when once again the door is thrown open and Sir Maurice comes in.

'Another surprise packet!' says Gower faintly. 'Miss Hescott, you know everything. *Are* there more to come? I'm not strong; my heart is in a bad state. Pray, *pray* give me a gentle word of warning if —'

'Isn't he looking well!' says Minnie excitedly.

Sir Maurice is indeed looking very handsome as he comes up the room. It brings a mutual smile to Margaret and Colonel Neilson's lips as they note the extreme care with which he has got himself up for this visit to—*his wife*!

He is holding his head very high, and the flower in his button-hole has evidently been chosen with great care. He shakes

hands with Margaret first, of course, and with Tita last. She is sitting near Mrs. Chichester, and she gives him her hand without looking at him. She has grown a little white.

And then presently they all fade away : Captain Marryatt first, as has been said, and Mrs. Chichester last, still saying absurd things about the return of her ‘Jack’—absurd, but undoubtedly sincere. ‘That’s what made them so funny,’ said Gower afterwards. And now Margaret makes a little excuse and goes too, but not before she has asked Maurice to stay to dinner.

‘Oh, thank you !’ says Rylton, and then hesitates ; but after a glance at Tita’s face, most reluctantly, and a little hopelessly, as it seems to Margaret, declares he has a previous engagement.

‘Another night, then,’ says Margaret kindly, and closes the door behind her.

CHAPTER LIV.

HOW MAURICE GAINS ANOTHER POINT ; AND
HOW TITA CONSENTS TO THINK ABOUT
IT ; AND HOW MARGARET TELLS A LIE.

FOR a little while no word is spoken. It seems as if no words are theirs to speak. Rylton, standing on the hearthrug, has nothing to look at save her back, that is so determinedly turned towards him. She is leaning over the plants in one of the windows, pretending to busy herself with their leaves.

‘ Won’t you speak to me ?’ says Rylton at last.

He goes to her, and so stands that she is forced to let him see her face—a face

beautiful, but pale and unkind, and with the eyes so steadfastly lowered. And yet he

‘Knows they must be there,
Sweet eyes behind those lashes fair,
That will not raise their rim.’

‘I *have* spoken,’ says Tita.

‘When?’

‘I said, “How d’ye do” to you.’

‘Nonsense!’ says he; and then, ‘I don’t believe you said even so much. You gave me your hand, that was all; and that you gave reluctantly.’

‘Well, I can’t help it,’ slowly. ‘Remember what I told you that last day.’

‘I don’t want to remember anything,’ says he earnestly. ‘I want to start afresh—from this hour. And yet—there *is* one thing I must recall. You said—that last day—there was no love between us—that,’ slowly, ‘was not true. There is love on one side, at all events. Tita’—taking a step towards her—‘I——’

She makes a sudden, wild gesture,

throwing out her hands as if to ward off something.

'*Don't!*' cries she in a stifled voice.
'Don't say it!'

'I must! I *will!*' says Rylton passionately. 'I love you!' There is a dead silence, and in it he says again, 'I love you!'

For a moment Tita looks as if she were going to faint; then the light returns to her eyes, the colour to her face.

'First her, then me,' says she.

'Will you never forgive that?' asks he.
'And it was *before* I saw you. When I did see you—Tita, do try to believe this much, at all events, that after our marriage I was true to you. I think now, that from the first moment I saw you I loved you. But I did not know it, and—'

'That is not all,' says Tita in a low tone.

'I know—about Hescott. I beg your pardon about that. I was mad, I think; but the madness arose out of jealousy. I

could not bear to think you were happy with him, *unhappy* with me. If I had loved another, would I have cared with *whom* you were happy ?'

'I don't know,' says Tita.

There is something so forlorn in the sad little answer—something so forlorn in her whole attitude, indeed—the droop of her head, the sorrowful clasping of her small hands before her—that Rylton's heart burns within him.

'Be just—be just to me,' cries he; 'give me a chance. I confess I married you for your money. But now that accursed money is all gone (for which I thank heaven), and our positions are reversed. The money now is mine, and I come to you, and fling it at your feet, and implore you from my very soul to forgive me, and take me back.'

She still remains silent, and her silence cuts him to the heart.

'What can I say? What can I do to move you?' exclaims he, in a low tone,

but one that trembles. ‘Is your heart dead to me? Have I killed any hope that might have been mine? Is it too late in the day to call myself your lover?’

At this she lifts her hands and covers her face. All at once he knows that she is crying. He goes to her quickly, and lays his arm round her shoulder.

‘Let me begin again,’ says he. ‘Trust me once more. I know well, Tita, that you do not love me yet, but perhaps in time you will forgive me, and take me to your heart. I am sorry, darling, for every angry word I have ever said to you, but in every one of those angry words there was love for you, and you alone. I thought only of you, only I did not know it. Tita, say you will begin life again with me.’

‘I—I *couldn’t* go to The Place,’ says Tita. A shudder shakes her frame. ‘It was there I first heard—— It was there your mother told me of——’

'I know—I know ; and I don't ask you to go there. I think I told you I had bought a new place. Come there with me.'

'Why do you want me to go with you,' asks she, lifting her mournful eyes to his, 'when you know I do not love you ?'

'Yes; I know that.' He pauses. 'I ask you for many reasons, and not all selfish ones. I ask you for your own sake more than all. The world is cruel, Tita, to a woman who deliberately lives away from her husband ; and, besides——'

'I don't care about the world.'

'We all care about the world sooner or later, and, besides, you who have been accustomed to money all your life cannot find your present income sufficient for you, and Margaret may marry.'

'Oh yes ! Yes ; I think so.' For the first time she shows some animation. 'I *hope* so. You saw them talking together to-day ?'

'I did.' There is a slight pause, and

then : ' You are glad for Margaret. You wish everyone'—reproachfully—' to be happy except me.'

She shakes her head.

' Give me a kind word before I go,' says Rylton earnestly.

' What can I say ?'

' Say that you will think of what I have been urging.'

' One *must* think,' says she, in a rather refractory tone.

' You promise, then ?'

' Yes ; I shall think.'

' Until to-morrow, then,' says he, holding out his hand.

' To-morrow ?'

She looks troubled.

' Yes ; to-morrow. Don't forbid me to come to-morrow.'

He presses her hand.

The troubled look still rests upon her face as she turns away from him, having bidden him good-bye. The last memory of her he takes away with him is of a

little slender figure standing at the window, with her hands clasped behind her back. She does not look back at him.

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‘Well?’ says Margaret, coming into the room half an hour later. ‘Why, what a little snowflake you are! Come up to the fire and warm those white cheeks. Was it Maurice made you look like that? I shall scold him. What did he say to you?’

‘He wants me to go back to him.’

‘Yes?’ anxiously.

‘Well—— That’s all.’

‘But you, dearest?’

‘Oh, I can’t *bear* to think of it!’ cries Tita, in a miserable tone.

At this Margaret feels hope dying within her. Beyond question she has again refused to be reconciled to him. Margaret is so fond of the girl that it goes to her very heart to see her thus wilfully (as she believes) throwing away her best chance of happiness in this world.

'Tita, have you well considered what you are doing? A woman separated from her husband, no matter how free from blame she may be, is always regarded with coldness by—'

'Oh yes! I know,' impatiently. '*He* has been saying all that.'

'And, after all, what has Maurice done that you should be so hard with him? Many a man has loved another woman before his marriage. That old story—'

'It isn't that,' says Tita suddenly. 'It is'—she lays her hands on Margaret's shoulders, and regards her earnestly and with agitation—'it is that I fear *myself*.'

'You fear'—uncertainly—'that you don't love him?'

'Pshaw!' says Tita, letting her go, and rising to her feet, as though to sit still is impossible to her. 'What a speech from you to me—you, who know all! *Love* him! I am sure about that, at all events. I know I don't.'

'Are you so sure?'

‘Positive—*positive*!’

‘What? Not even *one* doubt?’

‘Not one.’

‘What is your fear, then?’ asks Margaret.

‘That even if I went back to him, took up my old position, asked his guests to our house, and so on, that sooner or later I should quarrel with him a second time, and then this dreadful work would have to be done all over again.’

‘That would rest in your own hands. Of course, it is a risk, if, indeed, you mean what you say, Tita’—watching her closely—‘that you do not care for Maurice. But’—anxiously—‘at all events, you do not care for anyone else?’

‘No—no—no’—petulantly—‘why should I? I think all men more trouble than they are worth.’

‘If that is so, and you are heart-whole, I think it your positive duty to live with your husband,’ says Margaret, with decision. ‘How can you hesitate, Tita?’

Are the vows you uttered at the altar nothing to you? Many a woman lives with a bad husband through conscientious motives, and——'

'I don't believe it,' says Tita, who is evidently in one of her most wayward moods. 'They go on living with their horrid husbands because they are afraid of what people will say about them. You know you said something about it yourself just now, and so did—*he*; something about the world being disagreeable to any woman, however good, who is separated from the man she married.'

Margaret gives up the argument.

'Well,' says she, smiling, 'at all events, Maurice isn't a horrid husband.'

'You say that because he isn't yours,' with a shrug.

'Come back here, you bad child,' says Margaret, laughing now, 'and listen to me for a little while longer. You know, Tita darling, that I have your interest, and yours only, at heart. Promise me you

will at least think of what Maurice proposes.'

'Oh, I've promised *him* that,' says Tita, frowning.

'You have?' cries Margaret. 'Oh, you *good* girl! Come! that's right. And so you parted not altogether at war? How glad I am! And he—he was glad, too. He'—anxiously—'he said——'

'He said he was coming again tomorrow,' with apparent disgust.

'To get your answer?'

'Oh, I suppose so! I don't know, I'm sure,' with such a sharp gesture as proves to Margaret her patience has come to an end. 'Let us forget it—put it from us—while we can.' She laughs nervously. 'You see what a temper I have! He will repent his bargain, I think—if I do consent. Come, let us talk of something else, Meg—of you.'

'Of me?'

'What better subject? Tell me what Colonel Neilson was saying to you in that

window this evening,' pointing to the one farthest off.

'Nothing—nothing at all. He is so stupid,' says Margaret, blushing crimson. 'He really never sees me without proposing all over again, as if there was any good in it.'

'And what did you say this time?'

Margaret grows confused.

'Really, dearest, I was so taken up thinking of you and Maurice,' says she, with a first (and most flagrant) attempt at dissimulation, 'that I believe I forgot to—to—say anything.'

Tita gives way to a burst of irrepressible laughter.

'I like that,' says she. 'Well, at all events, by your own showing, you didn't say *no*.'

CHAPTER LV.

HOW TITA RECEIVES A BASKET OF FLOWERS
AND AN ENTREATY ; AND HOW SHE CEASES
TO FIGHT AGAINST HER DESTINY.

It is quite early, barely eleven o'clock, and a most lovely morning. Tita and Margaret, who have just settled down in the latter's boudoir, presumably to write their letters, but actually to have a little gossip, are checked by the entrance of a servant, who brings something to Tita and lays it on the table beside her.

'With Sir Maurice Rylton's compliments,' says the servant.

'What is it?' says Tita, when he has gone, with the air of one who instinctively

knows, but would prefer to go on guessing about it.

'Not dynamite, assuredly,' says Margaret. 'What a delightful basket!'

'What can be inside it?'

'The best way to find that out is to open it,' says Margaret, with abominable briskness. 'Shall I cut these pretty ribbons, or will you?'

'No, *don't* cut them,' says Tita quickly.

She draws the basket towards her, and slowly and with care unties the true lover's knot of pale blue ribbon that fastens it.

'Flowers, I expect,' says Margaret.

'But tied up like this?'

'That is because there is a letter inside it.'

'You seem to know all about it,' says Tita, at which Margaret grows a little red, and wishes, like the parrot, that she had not spoken.

'Yes; it is flowers,' says Tita.

'Such flowers!' cries Margaret. And, indeed, it is a rare basketful of Nature's

sweetest gifts that lies before them. Delicate reds, and waxen whites, and the tender greens of the waving fern. ‘How beautiful!’ exclaims Margaret.

Tita has said nothing. But now she puts out her hand.

‘What is that?’ says she.

‘Why, the letter,’ says Margaret, forgetting her late discomfiture in the excitement of this new discovery.

Tita draws it forth reluctantly. It is tied to a little plant—a tiny plant of pale forget-me-not.

‘What can he have to write about?’ says she. ‘Perhaps it is to say he is not coming to-day; let us hope so. But what does this plant mean?’

She opens the envelope with disdainful fingers. It does not, however, contain a letter, after all. It is only a verse scribbled on a card :

‘If you will touch, and take, and pardon,
 What I can give ;
Take this, a flower, into your garden,
 And bid it live.’

Neither of them speaks for a moment.

'It is a pretty message,' says Margaret at last.

'Yes.'

Tita's face is turned aside. Her hand is still resting on the table, the verse and the little plant within it.

'He will be coming soon,' says Margaret again.

'Yes, I know.'

'You will be kind to him, dearest?'

'That—I *don't* know.'

'Oh! I *think* you do,' says Margaret; 'I think you must see that he—'

'Let me think it out, Meg,' says Tita, turning a very pale face to hers. 'When he comes tell him I am in the small drawing-room.'

She kisses Margaret and leaves the room. The basket of flowers, too, she has left behind her. But Margaret can see that she has taken with her the tiny plant of forget-me-not.

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He comes quickly towards her, holding out his hand.

‘Margaret said I should find you here,’ says he. Hope, mingled with great fear, is in his glance. He holds the hand she gives him. ‘Have you kept your promise?’ he asks her. ‘Have you thought of it?’

‘I am tired of thinking,’ says she, with a long sigh.

‘And your decision?’

‘Oh! it shall be as you wish,’ cries she, dragging her hand out of his, and walking backwards from him till she reaches the wall, where she stays, leaning against it as if glad of its support, and glancing at him from under her long lashes. ‘You shall have your own way. You have always had it. You will have it to the end, I suppose.’

‘You consent, then?’ exclaims he.

‘Ah! That is all you think of. To save appearances! You’—her breath coming quickly—‘you care nothing for what *I* am feeling——’

'Don't wrong me like that,' says Rylton, interrupting her. 'If you could read my heart you would know that it is of you alone I think. For you I have thought out everything. You shall be your own mistress—— I shall not interfere with you in any way. I ask you to be my wife, so far as entertaining our guests goes, and the arranging of the household, and that—— No more! You shall be free as air. Do you think that I do not know how I have sinned towards you?' He breaks off in some agitation, and then goes on. 'I tell you I shall not for one moment even question a wish of yours.'

'I should not like that,' says Tita sadly. 'That would keep me as I was: always an outsider; a stranger; a guest in my own house.'

Rylton walks to the window and back again. A stranger! *Had* she felt like a stranger in her own house? It hurts him terribly.

'It was I who should have been the

stranger,' says he. ' It was all yours—and yet—did I really make you so unhappy ?'

There is something so cruel in his own condemnation of himself that Tita's heart melts.

' It is all over,' says she. ' It is at an end. If—with a sad, strange little glance at him—'we must come together again, let us not begin the new life with recriminations. Perhaps I have been hard to you—Margaret says I have—and if so——' Tears rise in her eyes and choke her utterance. She turns aside from him, and drums with her fingers on the table near her. ' I thought those flowers so pretty,' says she.

' I didn't know what to send,' returns he, in a voice as low as her own.

' I liked them.'

' Did you?' He looks at her. ' And yet you are not wearing one of them—not even a bud. I said to myself, when I was coming here, that if you wore one I should take hope from it.'

‘Flowers die,’ says she, with her eyes upon the ground.

‘Cut flowers. But I sent you a little plant.’

‘Forget-me-not would not live in town.’

‘But we shall not live in town. You have promised to come to the country with me,’ says he quickly. ‘And even if this plant dies, another can grow—a new one. I told you that I had bought a place. It—it is in the same county as Oakdean.’

‘Ah! Oakdean!’ A pathetic look grows within her large eyes. She turns aside. ‘I *dread* the country now that my old home is gone—— I——’ Suddenly she gives way, and bursts into a storm of tears. ‘Everything seems gone!’ cries she. ‘But if I *must* seek a new home let me go to it at once. Don’t let me think about it. Take me there as soon as ever you can.’

‘To-morrow,’ says Rylton, ‘if you wish.’

‘Yes, yes,’ feverishly, ‘to-morrow.’

She is sobbing bitterly.

'Tita,' says Rylton, who is now very pale, 'if it costs you so much, I give up my plan. Stay with Margaret—stay where you like, only let me provide for you.'

'No, I shall go with you,' says Tita, making a violent effort to suppress her sobs. 'It is arranged, I tell you. Only let me go *at once*. I cannot stand the thinking of it day by day.'

'To-morrow, then, by the evening train ; will that suit you ?'

'Yes.'

'I shall call for you here ?'

'Yes.'

'Remember our compact. You shall be as free as air.'

'I know.'

He goes to her, and, taking her head between his hands, kisses her forehead. He would have liked to take her in his arms and kiss her with all his heart, but something forbids him.

'Good-bye, Tita.'

'Good-bye.'

He has his hand upon her shoulder now.

'Do you know you have never once called me by my name,' says he.

'Have I not?' mournfully.

'Not once; and if we are to be friends—friends, at least—you might—' He pauses, but no answer comes. 'Well, good-bye,' says he again.

He is half-way across the room when she says: 'Good-bye, Maurice,' in a faint tone, like a child repeating a lesson.

The sorrow in Rylton's heart is deeper as he leaves the house.

CHAPTER LVI.

HOW A JOURNEY IS BEGUN AS THE DAY
DIES DOWN; AND HOW THAT JOURNEY
ENDS; AND HOW A GREAT SECRET IS
DISCOVERED — THE SECRET OF TITA'S
HEART.

THE parting between Margaret and Tita had taken a long time. There had been many admonitions from the former, and entreaties from the latter, principally about Margaret's coming to see her as soon as possible. These precious moments had been broken in upon by Colonel Neilson, who had sent up word by one of the servants that he asked a few minutes' conversation with Miss Knollys.

Those minutes had grown into a quarter of an hour, and then Margaret had come back looking decidedly guilty, but rather inclined to a tearful mirth.

' You needn't speak,' said Tita, with a pretence at contempt. ' You didn't say "No" on Sunday, and you have said "Yes" to-day. It is quite simple.'

' Well, it is all your fault,' Margaret had returned, sinking into a chair, and beginning to laugh rather shamefacedly. ' If you had stayed with me it never would have happened. But you have shown me how delightful companionship is, and having shown it, you basely desert me. And now—I feel so lonely that—'

' That ?'

' I have broken through all my vows, and said——'

' Yes ?'

' Yes !'

' You must *both* come down and stay with me as soon as ever you can,' said Tita, giving her a tender hug.

* * * *

The long sweet summer evening is growing into night as the train draws up at the old station that Tita knows so well. She looks out of the window, her heart in her eyes, taking in all the old signs—the guard fussy as ever—Evans the porter (she nods to him through eyes filled with tears)—the glimpse of the church spire over the top of the station-house—the little damp patch in the roof of the booking-office.

She almost starts, so deep is her reverie, as Rylton lays a hand upon her shoulder.

‘Come,’ says he, smiling.

‘Why——’ begins she, surprised. She sees he has her travelling-bag in his hand, and that he wants to pass her to open the window.

‘This is our station,’ says he.

‘This?’

‘Yes. I think I told you the new place I had bought was in this county.’

‘Yes. I know, but so near——’

Rylton has opened the door, and is calling to a porter. Evans comes up.

'Welcome home, my lady,' says he, touching his cap to Tita, who gives him a little nod in return, whilst feeling that her heart is breaking.

'Home!' She feels as if she hates poor Evans, and yet of course he had meant nothing. No doubt he thought she was coming back to Oakdean. Dear, *dear* Oakdean, now lost to her for ever!

A carriage is waiting for them, and Rylton, putting her into it, goes away to see to their luggage. Tita, sitting drearily within, her heart sad with recollections of the past, is suddenly struck by a sound that comes to her through the shut windows of the carriage. She opens the one nearest to her and listens.

It is only a poor vagrant on the pavement without, singing for a penny or two. But the song goes to her very heart :

'It's hame, and its hame—hame fain wad I be,
O ! hame, hame, hame, to my ain countree.'

A sob rises in her throat. So near to her own dear home, and yet so far. She finds her purse, and hastily flings half a crown to the poor wretch outside, who never guesses why she got so large a dole.

And now Rylton returns. He gets in. The carriage drives away through the well-remembered town, over the old bridge, and into the sweetness of the sleeping country.

Already the stars are out. Through the warm bank of dying sunset over there a pale little dot is glimmering. Steel-gray are the heavens, fast deepening into darkest blue, and over the hills, far, far away, the faint suggestion of a 'young May moon' is growing. A last faint twittering of birds is in the air, and now it ceases, and darkness falls and grows, and shadows fill the land and hide the edges of the moors, and blacken the sides of the walls as they drive past them.

Tita is always peering out of the

window. At a sudden turn in the road she draws back as if hurt.

'This is the turn to Oakdean!' says she sharply.

'Yes; we are going this road.'

'It must be near, then, this new place—quite near?'

'It is near.'

She looks at him for a moment, her face fraught with great grief.

'Oh, how *could* you?' says she. 'How *could* you have bought a place so close to it?'

She leans back into her corner, and it is his misery at this moment that he cannot know whether she is crying or not. Presently she starts forward again.

'Why, we are going down the road!' cries she. 'We shall go past the gates!' She waits as if for an answer, but he makes her none. 'Oh, you *should* have told me,' says she faintly.

He puts out his hand and takes hers. She does not repulse him, and he holds it

in a close clasp. Is there some magnetic influence at work that tells her all the truth — that betrays to her his secret? She turns suddenly and looks at him, but he refuses to meet her glance. He can feel that she is trembling violently. Her hand is still in his, and her eyes are fixed intently on the open window near her.

And now they are nearing Oakdean. She can see the pillars of the gates. A little cry escapes her. And now, *now* they are *at* the gate—soon they will be past—

But what is this? The coachman has drawn up! They stop! The groom springs down—someone from the lodge rushes quickly out. The gates are flung wide. The horses dash down the avenue!

* * * *

Presently they draw up at the hall door—the door of Oakdean!

Rylton, getting out, takes her in his arms, and places her on the first step of the stones that lead to the hall.

Not one word has passed between them since that last reproach of hers.

And now they have reached the library. It is brilliantly lit. Tita, flinging off her wraps in a mechanical sort of way, looks round her. Nothing is changed—nothing! It is *home*. Home really—home as it always had been!

She is pale as a little ghost! Though she has looked at the room, she has not once looked at *him*! And, with a sort of feeling that he has made a bid for her favour, Rylton makes no attempt to go to her or say a word.

She is so silent, so calm, that doubts arise within him as to the success of his experiment—for experiment it must be called. He had bought in the old house expressly to please her the moment he was in a position to do so; had bought it, indeed, when she was showing a most settled determination to have nothing to do with him—directly after her refusal to accept a competence at his hands.

And now, how will it be? Her eyes are wandering round the room, noting each dear familiar object; at last they come to Rylton.

He is looking back at her—a little sad, a little hopeless. Their eyes meet.

Then all at once she gives way. She runs to him, and flings herself into his open arms.

‘To do this for me! *This!*’ cries she.

She clings to him. Her voice dies away.

She is lying on his breast. He can feel her heart beating against his. His arms tighten round her.

‘Tita, you love me!’ whispers he, in a low tone, passionately.

She feels so small a thing in his embrace—a mere child of fourteen might be a bigger thing than she is. The knowledge that she has grown very thin during their estrangement goes to his heart like a knife. Oh, dear little, *darling* girl!

‘You must love me—you *must*,’ says

he, holding her to him, as if he could never let her go. ‘*Try to love me, Tita.*’

Slowly, very slowly, she stirs within his arms. She looks up at him. It is such a strange look. It transfigures the beautiful little face, making it even more beautiful than it was before. But Maurice, who is hanging on it, to whom it means life or death, does not dare translate the expression. It seems to him that she is going into all that intolerable past and reading his very soul. God grant she may read it aright!

The strain grows too terrible; he breaks it.

‘My darling, speak!’ entreats he.

She wakes as if from a dream.

‘Oh, I love you—I do love you!’ cries she. She lays her hands against his breast, and leans back from him. ‘I have loved you always, I think; but now I know it. Oh, Maurice, love me too, and not *her—not her!*’

*

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*

It is half an hour later. He has induced her to eat something, and at her request has eaten something himself—as a fact, being both young, they were both extremely hungry, and are now feeling infinitely better.

‘I want a fresh handkerchief,’ says Tita, looking up at him shyly, but with a smile that shows all her pretty teeth. ‘*See how you have made me cry!*’ She holds up the little damp rag that she has been using since her arrival. ‘Give me one out of my bag.’

Opening her bag to get her the handkerchief desired, something else falls to the floor—a small thing. He picks it up.

‘Why, what is this?’ says he.

‘Oh, it is my—— Give it to me. It is my forget-me-not,’ says she, colouring hotly.

A pause.

‘The little plant I sent?’ asks he softly.

‘Yes,’ in a lovely, shamefaced way.

‘You kept that?’

‘To plant it here.’

‘Because——’

‘Oh, you *know*.’

‘Tell me again.’

‘Because I love you.’

She throws her arms around his neck,
and their lips meet.

THE END.

Telegraphic Address :
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